

MUSCAT-BARKA BUS ROUTE

MWASALAT ANNOUNCED THE LAUNCH OF MUSCAT-BARKA ROUTE STARTING ON FRIDAY. THIS ROUTE WILL ENABLE PEOPLE LIVING IN BARKA TO TRAVEL TO MUSCAT DAILY. THE COMPANY WILL PLY BUSES DAILY ON THE NEW ROUTE DURING DIFFERENT TIMES, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE NEED OF EMPLOYEES TO GO TO MUSCAT AND RETURN TO THE WILAYAT.





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ASIAN FACTORIES KICK OFF 2018 ON STRONG NOTE P11



OMAN CONTINUE WINNING SPREE P16



BOOKS ON WHEELS P14

OMAN

Crude prices reach \$66.40 a barrel

MUSCAT: Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) said that Oman oil price for April delivery on Thursday reached \$66.40. The DME statement said that the price of Oman oil rose 77 cents from the price of Wednesday, which was \$65.67. The average price of Oman oil for February delivery has stabilised at \$61.60, thus 81 cents per barrel higher than January delivery. US crude futures gained 0.1 per cent to \$64.79 per barrel in early trade after gaining 7.7 per cent in January, the best month for the contract since September.

ASIA

Smoking banned on Thai tourist beaches

BANGKOK: Thailand banned smoking and littering at 24 beach side locations that are popular with tourists over environmental concerns on Thursday, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment said. The Southeast Asian country has been a tourist magnet for decades, from its backpacker heyday in the early 1990s to its current popularity with tourists from mainland China. It expects to welcome a record 37.55 million tourists in 2018.

DETAILS ON P5





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INSIDESTORIES



SINGAPORE FREEZES NUMBER OF PRIVATE VEHICLES ON THE ROAD P5



KENYA COURT SUSPENDS GOVT SHUTDOWN OF THREE TV STATIONS P8



SUPER MARIO READY FOR LEAP INTO ANIME FILM P10


WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT MAX: 23°C MIN: 17°C	SALALAH MAX: 29°C MIN: 21°C	NIZWA MAX: 29°C MIN: 15°C
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SUNRISE 06.47 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 05:30
DHUHR: 12:26
ASR: 15:36
MAGHRIB: 17:59
ISHA: 19:11



CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY INFORMATION IN OMAN

MONITORING: Centre to analyse content published electronically

MUSCAT: A Centre for Community Information will be established to monitor and analyse the content of what is published electronically and to conduct studies and research to provide decision-makers with necessary information regarding the work of their parties.

This was revealed by Dr Abdulmunim bin Mansour al Hasani, Minister of Information, during the Second Media Family Forum on Wednesday night.

The forum organised by the Ministry of Information in cooperation with the Public Authority for Radio and Television (PART) and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), was held under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Haitham bin Tareq al Said, Minister of Heritage and Culture, at the Cultural Centre of SQU.

Speaking on the occasion Dr Abdulmunim emphasised the importance of strategic partnership between the Ministry of Information, PART and SQU in organising the forum, in addition to the establishment of the Centre for Community Information to monitor and analyse the content of what is published electronically and to conduct studies and research to provide decision-makers with the

The Media Training Centre which is administratively and financially independent will work in cooperation with the Ministry, PART and the SQU

DR ABDULMUNIM
Minister of Information

necessary information regarding the work of their parties.

The programme 'Skills to Deal with Media' has been completed in five workshops over two years for directors of departments and sections of public relations and media in government institutions.

The minister said that the Omani media accomplished a number of achievements last year, including the signing of the first charter of ethics of the profession issued by the Omani Journalists Association (OJA), in cooperation with the Department


of Information at SQU and Omani media institutions, in addition to the establishment of the Government Services Centre in the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in strategic partnership with the Ministry of Information, PART and SQU.

He said that the winners of the media excellence competition were honoured recently.

The first batch of documents of the United Nations Media Archive was received in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry, as well as the issuance of Royal Decree 3/2018 to establish the Media Training Centre which is administratively and financially independent and works in cooperation with the Ministry of Information, PART and SQU, he added.

He said that this years preparations are on to activate the training centre after studying the needs of all the media institutions, in addition to a training programme for media students from higher education institutions in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education and SQU, adding that preparations are also on to establish the first media library specialised on Omani media to be a reference for researchers and students in Omani media.

TURN TO P2



BARREN ROCK DESERT AND SCENIC BEACHES

The Wilayat of Al Jazer is a beautiful place located in the Governorate of Al Wusta and is known for its scenic beaches. The wilayat occupies a distinct position on the coastal strip of Al Wusta Governorate. The people here practise a range of crafts and industries including manufacture of paddles and fishing nets.

DETAILS ON P3

Arab League faults US aid cut to Palestinians

CAIRO: Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said on Thursday that a cut in US funding for a UN agency that helps Palestinian refugees will put the stability and security of the region at risk.

The United States, by far the largest contributor to UNRWA, announced on January 16 that Washington would withhold \$65 million of \$125 million it had planned for the agency this year.

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN member states.

US President Donald Trump has questioned the value of such funding, and the State Department

said the agency needed to make unspecified reforms.

"It is no secret that this trend poses a threat to the refugee issue as well as the negative consequences that will not only affect the receiving countries of refugees, but also the stability and security of the region," Aboul Gheit said at an Arab League meeting.

More than half of the two million people in Gaza are dependent on support from UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies.

Palestinians say the funding decision could deepen hardship in the Gaza Strip, where the unemployment rate is 46 per cent.

— AFP

500 million citizens to be covered under Indian healthcare scheme

NEW DELHI: India on Thursday announced a national healthcare scheme for half a billion of its poorest citizens in a major giveaway to voters in the final budget before a general election.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said India's most vulnerable families would be able to access up to Rs 500,000 (\$7,855) a year for hospital cover through the initiative.

India spends a little over one per cent of its GDP on public healthcare — one of the lowest proportions in the world — a sum the government is aiming to increase to 2.5 per cent by 2025. The government currently provides Rs 30,000 towards healthcare



People react as they look at a screen displaying the Sensex on the facade of the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) building in Mumbai.

— Reuters

DELEGATED BY HM, AL SAADI ATTENDS CAMEL FESTIVAL



RIYADH: Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Shaikh Saad bin Mohammed al Saadi, Minister of Sports Affairs, took part in King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, which was held on Thursday in Saudi capital Riyadh under the auspices of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia. During the activities of the festival, King Salman received the minister of sports affairs. During the meeting, Shaikh Al Saadi conveyed the greetings and best wishes of His Majesty the Sultan to King Salman, and the brotherly Saudi people further progress and prosperity. On his turn, King Salman asked Shaikh Al Saadi to convey his greetings and best wishes of good health and well-being to His Majesty the Sultan, and the Omani people further progress. — **ONA**

OCCI branches elect their chiefs, deputies

MUSCAT: The Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in all governorates of the Sultanate met on Thursday to elect a head and a deputy to the board of directors of each branch by secret ballot at OCCI headquarters under the supervision of the OCCI Election Committee.

In the Governorate of Dhofar, Hussein bin Hathieth al Ba'hari was elected as head of the OCCI branch and Salim bin Abdullah al Kaf as Deputy Head.

In the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah, Hamad bin Said al Rabkhi was elected as head and Said bin Nassir al Siyabi as deputy head.

The Governorate of Al Dhahirah elected Saif bin Said al Badi as head of the branch and Fahad bin Rashid al Zidi as deputy head.

In the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah, Ali bin Salim al Hajri was elected as head and Qais bin A'amir al Shibani as deputy head.

In the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah, Anwar bin Hamad al Sinani was elected as head of the branch and Nassir bin Mohammed al Maamari as deputy head.

The Governorate of North Al Batinah elected Abdullah bin Ali al Sha'ei as head of the branch and Said bin Ali al Abri as deputy head.

In the Governorate of South Al Batinah, Hamoud bin Salim al Sa'adi was elected as head and Ameen bin Khamis al Sa'adi as deputy.

In the Governorate of Al Wusta, Dr Salim bin Sulayem al Junaibi was chosen as head and Saud bin Khalifa al Hakamani as deputy head.

In the Governorate of Al Buraimi, Zahir bin Mohammed al Kaabi was elected head of the branch and Yousef bin Hamad al Azani as deputy head.

In the Governorate of Musandam, Raed bin Mohammed al Shihi was elected head of the branch and Khalid bin Mohammed al Shihi as deputy head.

TURN TO P2

for poor families, but that sum is insufficient to cover most medical procedures.

The programme would take public healthcare in the world's largest democracy "to a new aspiration level", said Jaitley.

"This will be the world's largest government-funded healthcare programme," he told parliament in his budget speech.

"The government is steadily but surely progressing towards a goal of universal health coverage."

He said "adequate funds" would be provided to roll out the insurance programme to 500 million of India's poorest nationwide.

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Centre for Community Information to be set up

FROM PAGE 1

The minister announced an award for Media Research from the Ministry of Information, and said that the establishment of the Omani Media Museum has begun. This museum will tell the story of human beings through the history of the press and the media in Oman, and what it says about the Sultanate.

The establishment of Media Dialogue Forum was announced to be a continuous meeting between specialists and media professionals, indicating that the Ministry of Information will hold a symposium on media, the child and the future with participation of a number of specialist writers for children.

Regarding the media excellence competition, the minister announced that this year's competition will be dedicated to radio and television.

The ceremony included a drama show by Al Dan Group entitled 'Humanisation of the Media' to address the humanitarian concerns in



the media, in addition to celebrating the Arab initiative 'Makarim', an Arab initiative on the ethics of the media.

The event included a film on the march of the public press and the launching of a number of publications of the Ministry of Information such as Oman International Photography Competition, Oman in Len's Memory, Citizenship in the Sultanate of Oman, Principles, Beginnings and Development, Sultanate of Oman Ranks High at Arab and International Indices, in addition to Omani Press Pioneers.

A number of the pioneers of the public press were honoured, and media excellence awards in the field of journalism were announced, as well as Omani media professionals who won Arab and international awards in 2017 were also honoured.

In addition to this a photo exhibition on the presence of Oman in international newspapers in the last century was also held. — ONA

OCCI branches elect their chiefs, deputies



FROM PAGE 1

The winners of the OCCI election will meet at OCCI headquarters with the heads of the branches from all the governorates on Sunday to elect by secret ballot a chairman of the board and two deputies, as well as two other members to form the five members of Executive Committee.

The meeting will also appoint a secretary of the executive administration, and the election of the members of the audit and investment committees who are not members of the executive committee in accordance with Article 23 in the Royal Decree No 45/2017. — ONA

Arab joint security work discussed

MUSCAT: Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, received at the General Diwan of the ministry on Thursday Dr Mohammed bin Ali Koman, Secretary-General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, who is currently visiting the Sultanate. The two sides reviewed a range of issues of concern to the Arab joint security work.

The visit of Secretary-General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council to the Sultanate comes within the framework of his consultative tour to several Arab countries in preparation for the 35th session of the Arab Interior Ministers Council. The meeting was attended by Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Interior.

Meanwhile, Lt Gen Hassan bin Mohsin bin Salim al Shraiqi, Inspector-General of Police and Customs, also received in his office Dr Mohammed bin Ali Koman. During the meeting, they exchanged cordial talks and discussed means of cooperation between the Royal Oman Police and the General Secretariat of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers. — ONA

Majlis Ash'shura chief receives Saudi delegation

MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura received at the Majlis's HQs' on Thursday a delegation of the Command and Staff College (CSC) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) led by Maj Gen Hani Dhafir al Amri.

The meeting touched on the bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries and means of enhancing them in various areas.

During the meeting, Al Maawali briefed the Saudi delegation about Majlis Ash'shura and its legislative powers. — ONA

State Council bags second place in ROP traffic safety competition

MUSCAT: The State Council prevailed as the second winner of the 2017 Royal Oman Police (ROP) Traffic Safety Competition in the category of 'Government organisations' on Thursday at ceremony held under the patronage of Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance and the Institute of Traffic Safety.

The main Committee of the competition commended the efforts of the State Council made to enhance traffic awareness, noting in particular the activities and events that were included in the Council's participation in this year's Traffic Safety Competition 2017.

The competition has received high participation from government and private institutions to achieve their noble objectives, which indicates their shared vision to reduce traffic accidents, and avoid the disastrous effects that result from them.

Dr Khalid bin Salim al Saidi, Secretary-General of the State Council said that the Council's winning the second place in this year's traffic safety competition, is a remarkable achievement that comes in recognition of the Council's incessant efforts and initiatives in promoting road safety nationwide.

The award acknowledges our dedication, recognises the collaboration with ROP, and commends the combined efforts of the government and private sector towards improving traffic and road safety. It reflects the attention paid by the Council to this social issue. The award demonstrates its high level of social responsibility and

care for the local community in Oman.

The efforts come as a positive response to His Majesty's directives that emphasised that traffic safety remains a joint effort between the government, private sector and individuals in order to enhance the Omani society by fostering abilities and knowledge to achieve safe road use and traffic participation

The award denotes the success of the comprehensive initiative the Council launched as part of the national and social responsibility. It was meant to educate and raise awareness on the

best and safest ways to use roads, protect citizens from traffic accidents and reduce the percentage of casualties and injuries for the benefit of the community."

The efforts of the contestants who exerted efforts to reducing traffic accidents are notable. The intent was to curtail negative consequences.

Dr Al Saidi said the award serves as an incentive to continue efforts in the field of traffic awareness, especially since many of the programmes that participated in the competition are of sustainable nature.



WILAYAT OF AL JAZER



WHEN THE BLESSED RENAISSANCE EMERGED UNDER THE WISE LEADERSHIP OF HIS MAJESTY, MODERN HOUSES ARE COMMON IN THE WILAYAT AND THE DARK CAVES ABANDONED GIVING RISE TO WAREHOUSES WHICH ARE USED TO STORE WASTES

ANOTHER beautiful wilayat located in the Governorate of Al Wusta is the Wilayat of Al Jazer known for its scenic beaches.

The Wilayat of Jazer occupies a distinct position on the coastal strip of Al Wusta Governorate.

Located on the south coast of Al Wusta, in the north is the Wilayat of Duqm, while in the south is the Wilayat of Shalim, which is part of the Governorate of Dhofar, in the west being Wilayat of Haima and to the east is the Arabian Sea. There are about 12 villages in the wilayat with over 5,832 inhabitants.

Until 1970 AD, the inhabitants of Al Jazer built dark caves where they lived.

They were built from stones without adhesives due to climatic changes and storms. When the Blessed Renaissance emerged under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, modern houses are common in the wilayat and the dark caves abandoned giving rise to warehouses which are used to store wastes.

There is also an administrative and commercial complex consisting of a group of shops that provide for the needs of the wilayat. There are also schools that are specialised in all primary, preparatory and secondary levels.

The inhabitants practise a range of crafts and industries including manufacture of paddles, fishing nets and animal skins.

Though barren rock deserts dominate the governorate in which the wilayat is situated, Al Jazer is characterised by its charming nature.

It is a coastal area with many beaches. The wilayat is alike other coastal wilayats of Al Wusta-Duqm and Mahout with a number of beaches. The most important of which is Al Lokbi. The distance between Al Lokbi and Al Kahl is about 40 kilometres.

It encompasses spectacular places including Rima, Wadi Runeb and Al Khadra. Beaches of the wilayat are reputed for pure water such as the Madher beach.

These beaches have many necessary services and residential units with modern equipment.

The beaches stretch for vast distances along the Arabian Sea and are famous for their cleanliness and purity. This has resulted in increase of marine plants which give the water its green colour. Many birds fly past the area during migration.

On land, the moderate climate, influenced by the annual autumn season in Dhofar, aids growth of a variety of plants.

Barren rock desert and scenic beaches





US allows Syrians to stay for another 18 months

WASHINGTON: The United States has extended a special protected status for Syrians that keeps some 7,000 of them from being deported back to their war-racked country, the Department of Homeland Security said on Wednesday.

President Donald Trump’s administration has stripped that same protection from hundreds of thousands of immigrants from several Central American countries, raising fears among Syrians that they might be next.

“After carefully considering conditions on the ground, I have determined that it is necessary to extend the Temporary Protected Status designation for Syria,” Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said in a statement.

“It is clear that the conditions upon which Syria’s designation was based continue to exist, therefore an extension is warranted under the statute,” Nielsen said.

The extension lasts through September 30, 2019, and Nielsen will review conditions ahead of that date to determine whether it should be extended again or ended. The US government has stripped similar protection from some 200,000 Salvadorans, 59,000 Haitians and 5,300 Nicaraguans — some of whom had been in the country for decades.

The Syrian civil war broke out after President Bashar al Assad’s forces carried out a brutal crackdown on protesters in 2011, drawing in countries from around the region as well as the US, Russia and others.

The brutal conflict has killed more than 340,000 people and devastated swathes of the country, pushing millions of people to flee.

The Obama administration granted Syrians temporary protected status in 2012, the year after the war in Syria began, and extended it through the end of March.

The Obama administration re-designated Syria’s protected status several times so that waves of Syrians who had arrived in later years of the conflict could qualify.

There is no end in sight to the Syria conflict.

The Trump administration has shown a deep scepticism towards the protected status programme, announcing its end for immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua and Sudan.

Refugee advocates criticised the Trump administration’s decision not to re-designate Syria’s status, saying it ignored the fact that Syria’s conflict continues to produce new refugees.

“The Trump administration’s decision means that many Syrians who are already here in the US will not be able to apply for TPS status,” said Lia Lindsey, Oxfam America’s senior humanitarian policy adviser.

Some groups that favour immigration restrictions had opposed an 18-month extension of the humanitarian benefits for Syrians, saying six months would be more appropriate

— Agencies

BREAK SYRIA AID DEADLOCK, APPEALS UN

TIME FOR CEASEFIRE: No convoys made deliveries in December or January in Idlib province

GENEVA: A United Nations humanitarian task force has been unable to make deliveries to desperate Syrians for the past two months as President Bashar al Assad’s government has withheld approval for aid convoys, the UN humanitarian adviser said on Thursday.

Before they can move into besieged areas or across front lines, the convoys require letters from the government and security guarantees from armed groups. “It’s an all-time low in giving us the facilitation letters,” adviser Jan Egeland told reporters after meeting senior diplomats in Geneva.

Insurgents fighting Assad’s forces were also creating obstacles, contributing to the worst situation since 2015, he said. Egeland called on Russia, Turkey and Iran to de-escalate the fighting in Idlib governorate, which he said was “screaming for a ceasefire”.

“When we need their ability to influence the parties the most, in this bleak hour for humanitarian work, humanitarian diplomacy seems to be totally impotent. We’re



A Syrian Kurd is carried by a nurse at Afrin hospital on Wednesday, after he was reportedly injured by a Turkish airstrike on his village according to medical sources. Clashes raged between Turkish-backed forces and Kurdish militia in Syria’s Afrin region, as wounded civilians fled intense Turkish air strikes. — AFP

getting nowhere at the moment.” This week Russia convened a Syrian peace congress in Sochi. Egeland said it had so far not resulted in any

progress but he hoped that it would. Air strikes hit two crowded markets in Idlib this week, killing at least 31 people, and have deprived hundreds

France says Russia, Iran stop Syria government bombings

PARIS: France’s foreign ministry on Thursday condemned a series of bombing raids in rebel-held areas of Syria and called on Russia and Iran, as allies of the government, to urgently end the attacks and ensure humanitarian aid entered the regions. “It is urgent that Russia and Iran, the guarantors of the Astana process and allies of the Damascus regime, make arrangements for the bombing to cease and that humanitarian assistance arrives safely, completely and without hindrance to those who need it,” a foreign ministry spokeswoman said in a statement.

Meanwhile Turkey on Thursday dismissed cautionary remarks from France about its military

operation in northern Syria as “insults”, signalling continued strain between Ankara and its Nato allies over the incursion. French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday warned Turkey that the operation in the northern Afrin region should not become an excuse to invade Syria and that he wanted Ankara to coordinate its action with its allies.

Turkey launched the air and ground offensive, nearly two weeks ago to target the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia in Afrin. But the incursion has put pressure on relations with the West, particularly the United States, which has backed the Kurdish fighters and has its own troops on the ground supporting them in other parts of Syria. — Agencies

of thousands of healthcare. “I told the members of the humanitarian task force, we cannot have conventional warfare in what is essentially a refugee

camp,” Egeland said. Further north, a Turkish offensive in Afrin district has displaced about 15,000 people, Egeland said. — Reuters

ZIPPING OVER MOUNTAINS



People ride the world’s longest zip-line over Ras al Khamiah’s Jabal Jais Mountain, UAE on Wednesday.

— Reuters

Iran’s regional influence inevitable: Khamenei aide

ANKARA: The top adviser to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Thursday the country’s leadership had no intention of reining in its influence across the Middle East despite US pressure to do so, Fars news agency reported.

US President Donald Trump, who sees Iran as a rising threat to regional stability in the Middle East, has pledged to work with Arab states and Israel to curb what they say are Tehran’s attempts to extend its influence in the

region.

“Iran’s influence in the region is inevitable and to remain a key player in the region, this influence will continue,” the adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, was quoted by Fars as saying.

“Iran has no intention to abandon the oppressed nations in the region... Our presence in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon is in coordination with the governments of these countries,” Velayati said. “Iran is the heart of international developments... America

wants to tear down the Middle East... Iran opposes it.”

He also criticised slogans such as “Let go of Palestine,” and “Leave Syria, think about us”, which were chanted by tens of thousands of Iranians protesting against Iran’s unelected clerical elite and Iranian foreign policy in the Middle East. “Don’t worry about what was instigated by our foreign enemies... Chants like ‘Not Gaza, not Lebanon’ shows their lack of understanding of international

affairs... You cannot remain indifferent when your neighbour’s house is on fire,” he said.

Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised Iran’s biggest unrest for nearly a decade which spread to around 80 towns and cities across Iran in early January.

Iranian authorities said 25 people died and over 3,000 people were arrested during the unrest, which lasted for more than a week and then subsided. — AFP

Italy, Germany, Austria and Belgium also working on mechanisms that would shield their companies from the risk of US sanctions

France to finance exports to Iran, aims to sidestep US sanctions

PARIS: France will start offering euro-denominated credits to Iranian buyers of its goods later this year, a move to bolster trade while keeping it outside the reach of US sanctions, the head of state-owned investment bank Bpifrance said.

France and other European countries have been looking to increase trade with Iran since Paris, Washington and other world powers agreed in 2015 to lift many economic sanctions in exchange for controls on Iran’s nuclear programme.

The plan is to offer dedicated, euro-

denominated export guarantees to Iranian buyers of French goods and services.

By structuring the financing through vehicles without any US link, whether to the currency or otherwise, the aim is to avoid the extraterritorial reach of US legislation.

The move could anger US President Donald Trump, who has threatened to pull out of the Iran nuclear agreement reached by his predecessor Barack Obama.

Washington has maintained some financial restrictions, leaving private

banks — even those based outside the United States — wary of financing deals.

“We put a lot of preparation into this in 2017 and we keep on working, every single day, on the conditions of our entrance into Iran,” Bpifrance’s chief executive Nicolas Dufourcq said on Wednesday, referring to the new loans. “This is a completely separate flow (of money),” he added. “There is no (US) dollar in this scheme... no one holding a US passport.”

There is a pipeline of about 1.5 billion euros in potential contracts

from interested French exporters, Dufourcq told lawmakers on Wednesday.

France, which has had close business ties with Iran since before the fall of the Shah in 1979 and still operates several large factories there including Renault and PSA plants, is not alone in Europe in seeking to deepen trade ties.

A French banking source said Italy, Germany, Austria and Belgium were also working on mechanisms that would shield their companies from the risk of US sanctions.

Earlier this month, Italy and Iran agreed a framework credit agreement to fund investments in Iran worth up to 5 billion euros. The accord was signed by Iran’s government-owned Bank of Industry and Mine and Middle East Bank, and the investment arm of Italian state-owned holding Invitalia.

The Rome government chose Invitalia over state lender Cassa Depositi And Prestiti (CDP) because, unlike CDP, it has no exposure to US investors and no US footprint.

In October, Trump accused some

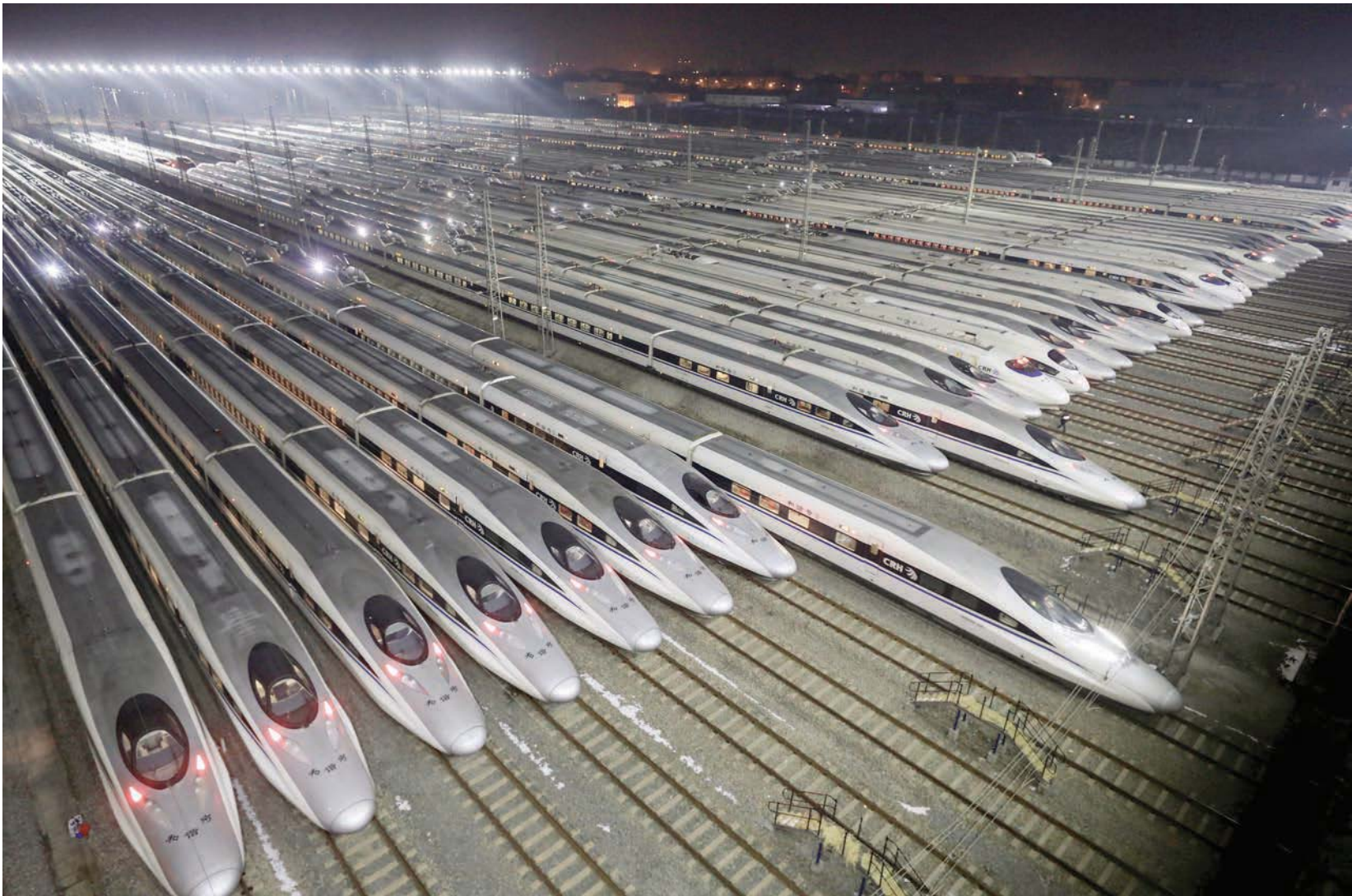
signatories to the nuclear deal of profiteering from the accord.

He later rowed back, saying he had told French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel they could “keep making money” in Iran.

French banks have been severely penalised by US financial authorities for their dealings with Iran before.

BNP Paribas received a \$9 billion fine in 2014 for violating US financial sanctions — even though it was imposed before the nuclear agreement was reached. — Reuters

GEARING UP FOR RUSH HOUR



China Railway High-speed Harmony bullet trains are seen at a high-speed train maintenance base, as the Spring Festival travel rush begins, in Wuhan, Hubei province, China on Thursday. – Reuters

Thailand bans smoking, littering at tourist beaches

BANGKOK: Thailand banned smoking and littering at 24 beachside locations that are popular with tourists over environmental concerns on Thursday, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment said.

The Southeast Asian country has been a tourist magnet for decades, from its backpacker heyday in the early 1990s to its current popularity with tourists from mainland China.

It expects to welcome a record 37.55 million tourists in 2018.

Environmental rights groups have urged successive governments to protect Thailand's palm-fringed beaches, which are frequently voted among the world's most beautiful, from unregulated development and littering, among other things.

A law that came into force on Thursday is aimed at tackling this problem, said Bannaruk Sermthong, a director at the Office of Marine and Coastal Resources Management.

"Starting today, smoking and cigarette-butt littering are prohibited on beach areas," Bannaruk said. "Anyone who wants to smoke must do so in designated smoking areas, not on the beaches."

The law protects 24 beaches in 15 provinces located along the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand. Anyone who violates the law will be taken to a criminal court and could face up to one year in jail, or a fine of up to 100,000 baht (\$3,190), or both. — AFP

Britain to move Bangkok Embassy after record sale

LONDON: Britain is to move its embassy in Bangkok after the record £420 million (\$596 million) sale of its current premises in the Thai capital, the UK's foreign ministry announced on Wednesday. The sale of the embassy in Bangkok's Lumpini neighbourhood was the foreign ministry's biggest ever such deal and the biggest land deal in Thai history, according to the ministry.

The 1920s building was purchased by property firm Hongkong Land and Thai conglomerate Central Group.

Embassy staff are due to relocate to the AIA Sathorn Tower by the end of the year. Large parts of the current embassy were said to be unusable and the building was in need of significant refurbishment. — AFP

Singapore freezes number of private vehicles on road

SINGAPORE: Singapore is freezing the number of private cars and motorcycles on the road from Thursday, in an unprecedented move to control traffic congestion and reduce the need for new roads in the city state.

"12 per cent of Singapore's total land area is taken up by roads. In view of land constraints and competing needs, there is limited scope for further expansion of the road network," according to a statement released by the Land and Transport Authority (LTA) in October last year.

Authorities announced that it would no longer allow an increase in the number of Certificates of Entitlement (COEs) issued by the government for private cars and motorcycles, starting from February 1.

A COE grants potential owners the right to purchase and keep a private vehicle for a maximum of 10 years, after which owners must decide whether to scrap the vehicle or renew the COE.

The COE quota for additional vehicles on the road has been reduced over the years from 1.5 per cent to 0.25 per cent, but this is the first time that it will hit 0 per cent, meaning no more permits for most categories of vehicle.



THE PRICE OF A COE IN SINGAPORE IS DECIDED THROUGH AN AUCTION SYSTEM, AND CAN OFTEN MATCH THE VALUE OF THE CAR ITSELF

The measure will be reviewed in 2021. The price of a COE in Singapore is decided through an auction system, and can often match the value of the car itself, which is one reason why Singapore is one of the most expensive places in the world to own a car.

The last round of bidding in January for a COE came up to 36,890 Singapore dollars (\$28,100). — dpa

Japan fire kills 11 at home for elderly people

TOKYO: Eleven people died after a fire broke out at a residence for elderly people with financial difficulties in northern Japan, police said on Thursday.

Television footage showed the three-storey building engulfed in flames and dozens of firefighters battling the blaze in snowy conditions.

Pictures of the aftermath showed the blackened husk of the building, whose roof had apparently collapsed due to the fire.

The victims — eight men and three women — were among 16 residents of the facility in Sapporo, Hokkaido, run by a local organisation.

The other five residents escaped with minor injuries, a police spokesman said, adding that authorities were investigating the victims' identities.

Police said they had launched a probe into the cause of the fire first alerted at 11:42 pm (1442 GMT) on Wednesday via an emergency call, the spokesman said.

The facility is aimed at supporting elderly people with financial difficulties by offering low-cost accommodation and helping them find work, public broadcaster NHK reported. It is usually unstaffed overnight, according to local media.

The accommodation was originally a Japanese inn built around 50 years ago that was later turned into the welfare facility.

"As there were many oil tanks (for kerosene stoves) there, I heard a number of small explosions," a 67-year-old woman in the neighbourhood told Jiji Press.

"Luckily, the only damage to our house was some cracks on the window," she was quoted as saying.

After dawn, police and firefighters were combing the black remains of furniture in freezing temperatures.

Another woman in the neighbourhood, 65, said when she



A firefighter inspects a facility to support senior people on welfare, where a fire occurred, in Sapporo on Thursday. — AFP

spotted smoke and flames while she was watching the total lunar eclipse from the window of her house, Jiji Press said.

"The smoke and flames were rising vertically. If there had been wind, the damage would have been bigger," she told Jiji.

"The surrounding area was bright as if it were a day because of efforts to extinguish fire, and smoke lasted until near the dawn," she said.

Others saw ash falling like snow in the vicinity of the fire, local media reported.

The fire sparked memories of a similar incident in Sapporo in 2010 when seven residents of a private nursing home for the elderly were killed in a pre-dawn fire.

Four women and three men aged in their 60s to their 80s died when the blaze swept through the two-storey wooden house.

In that case, all the residents were believed to suffer from dementia. — AFP

Philippine security forces arrest top Maoist guerrilla leader

MANILA: Philippine security forces arrested the head of the communist movement's armed wing following President Rodrigo Duterte's order to target guerrilla leaders after peace talks collapsed, police and human rights activists said on Thursday.

A police report seen by Reuters said Rafael Baylosis and a companion tried to flee from army and police intelligence agents who were following them but were cornered on Wednesday afternoon in the centre of the capital, Manila.

The arrest of Baylosis, 69, and

Roque Guillermo was a product of intelligence and surveillance operations after a tip-off from residents in Quezon City, northeast of Manila, police spokesman said.

"Baylosis is believed to be the acting secretary of the New People's Army," Bulalacao said, referring to a 3,000-strong guerrilla force that has waged a war in rural areas for nearly 50 years. The conflict has killed more than 40,000 people and stunted growth in resource-rich regions of the Philippines where mines and plantations are located. — AFP

"I lived as a child beggar in North Korea. I was stealing coal from a train when I fell off and lost my leg and my hand" Me and my crutches — a North Korean defector's story

SEOUL: Ji Seong-Ho, 35, a North Korean defector who appeared at President Trump's State of the Union address this week, is from Hoeryong, near the border with China.

He said last year about the wooden crutches that he left North Korea in 2006.

This is an edited translation of his story:

"I lived as a child beggar in North Korea. I was stealing coal from a train when I fell off and lost my leg and my hand. I had to bring the crutches with me.

"If I didn't have them, I wouldn't have made it here. The state doesn't help you in North Korea, and people who need crutches make their own.

"Mine are therefore not factory-made so they're not perfect and break



North Korean defector Ji Seong-Ho, currently a law student at Dongguk University, holds up his crutches during US President Donald Trump's State of the Union address to a joint session of the US Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington on Wednesday. — Reuters

easily. I had several pairs of crutches but they all broke, and this was the last pair.

"I used these crutches for 10 years, until I was 25, when I arrived in South Korea. I would steal coals from moving trains and fall off, destroying my crutches.

"Or I would get beaten up by the police and they'd take and then break my crutches. When they broke, I would make new ones.

"When I had new ones, I could go back outside. When I first arrived in South Korea I thought about throwing them out. South Korea's intelligence agency gave me a prosthetic leg. My friends said I should throw the crutches out and not think about North Korea. They said I should show Kim Jong Il I was living a new

life in South Korea and throw out everything I had from the North.

"Some asked if I got upset when I saw my crutches. But I couldn't just throw them out. To make my crutches, my friends had given me some wood that they had bought, and someone I knew in North Korea who had carpentry skills had made them.

"It was my father who added the final touches. There is a lot of love from my North Korean friends and family in these crutches. So I didn't throw them out.

"The South Korean government gave me some new crutches because the wood from my North Korean ones is hard and painful. But I still keep them, so as not to forget those memories." — Reuters

Polish senate passes Holocaust bill

WARSAW: Poland's senate on Thursday passed a controversial Holocaust bill, which was designed to defend the country's image abroad but has instead sparked a diplomatic row with Israel.

The bill, which sets fines or a maximum three-year jail term for anyone who refers to Nazi German death camps as Polish or accuses Poland of complicity in the Third Reich's crimes, was approved by 57 votes to 23 in the Upper House of Parliament, with two abstentions.

Israel had earlier called for the bill to be dropped, seeing one of its provisions as an attempt to deny Polish involvement in Nazi Germany's extermination of Jews.

"We have no tolerance for the distortion of the truth and rewriting history or denying the Holocaust," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday.

The Lower House of Parliament, which like the senate is controlled by the governing right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, had passed the bill

on Friday — triggering the protest from abroad. Knesset lawmakers penned a proposed bill of their own on Wednesday amending Israel's law regarding Holocaust denial, so that diminishing or denying the role of those who aided the Nazis in crimes against Jews would be punishable with jail. Before the vote on the Polish bill, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert expressed "concern" that "if enacted this draft legislation could undermine free speech and academic discourse."

"We are also concerned about the repercussions this draft legislation... could have on Poland's strategic interests and relationships — including with the United States and Israel," she added.

To take effect, the legislation still needs to be signed by Polish President Andrzej Duda, who has 21 days to do so. In theory he could veto the bill but on Monday he said: "We absolutely can't back down, we have the right to defend the historical truth."

— AFP

FUTURE IS ELECTRIC



Britain's Secretary of State for Business Greg Clark talks to Craig Wilson, Managing Director of Williams Advanced Engineering at the new production facility for Electric motor manufacturer YASA in Oxford, Britain, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Paperwork in France to go online by 2022

PARIS: The French will be able to fill out 100 per cent of official forms online by 2022 while the use of merit-based pay for civil servants will be increased, the government said on Thursday in a first review of public spending.

The review is the first attempt to spell out how President Emmanuel Macron aims to cut public spending by 60 billion euros over the term of his mandate as promised, in a country which has one of the highest public spending ratios in the world.

"There is no doubt we may hurt some sensitivities, some situations we got used to," Prime Minister Edouard Philippe told a news conference. "But you can't fix a country, you can't aim high, without being aware that you must shake and change some of these situations sometimes."

The philosophy behind the government's plan was to digitalise most technical and repetitive tasks in the different layers of bureaucracy, Philippe said. The government would also train employees to act as advisors rather than form fillers and all companies will be able to bid online for government tenders from October 31 this year. Budget Minister Gerald Darmanin said a voluntary redundancy plan for government employees could be envisaged while Philippe said more workers would be put on private contracts, reducing the number of career civil servants.

But he provided few details on where the axe would fall.

Legislation spelling out the plans will be ready by the start of next year, after consultation with civil service unions, Philippe said. The government was warned last month by the audit watchdog that it was still a long way from redressing the situation in its public finances and should not wait for the end of its mandate to spell out spending cuts.

— AFP

DIVORCE PANGS: Curbing immigration was a key reason Britons voted to leave the EU in 2016

UK, EU set for clash over citizens' rights

WUHAN: Prime Minister Theresa May has warned that European Union citizens arriving in Britain after Brexit next year may lose some rights, setting up a clash with the EU over their treatment during any transition period.

Curbing immigration was a key reason Britons voted to leave the EU in 2016, following a large influx of EU citizens, especially from poorer countries in eastern Europe.

The European Union has offered Britain a status quo transition until the end of 2020 after Brexit.

The bloc wants its three million citizens in Britain to remain eligible for all the same rights until the end of that period.

But May has suggested EU citizens coming to Britain after March next year will be treated differently.

"People who had come to the UK when we were a member of the EU had set up certain expectations," she told reporters on her way to a Chinese trade visit.

The bloc wants its 3 m citizens in Britain to remain eligible for all the same rights until the end of that period. But May has suggested EU citizens coming to Britain after March next year will be treated differently



"I'm clear there's a difference between those people who came prior to us leaving and those who will come when they know the UK is no longer

a member of the EU." A spokesman later said EU citizens would get the same rights during a transition phase, when Britain would set up a new registration scheme. But there must be a change after that period ends for those who arrived during the transition, he added. The issue is one obstacle Britain and the EU will need to resolve to reach a transitional deal, which will give the two sides time to prepare for the far-reaching impact of the end of 46 years of union.

Philippe Lamberts, a European lawmaker who deals with Brexit, told Reuters on Thursday: "Citizens' rights will be a negotiation point and we want to stand firm on this — that new provisions only enter into force after the end of the transition period."

Many Brexit backers are voicing concern that the referendum result may be "betrayed" by the plan to change little of the current relationship immediately after Britain formally leaves on March 29, 2019. But May dismissed some of those concerns.

Brexit economic forecasts wrong: Davis

LONDON: Brexit Minister David Davis rekindled a debate about the credibility of the government's own forecasts by saying on Thursday that every economic prediction on the British economy since the EU referendum has been wrong.

Davis made the comments in parliament after being asked about leaked analysis, drawn up by government officials, which suggests Britain would be worse off after Brexit under a wide range of potential scenarios.

He questioned the value of such research, saying the work is "incredibly difficult" and that every institution that had tried it had failed.

"Every forecasting model on the performance on the British economy post the referendum by

every major organisation, the banks, the government organisations and, indeed, international organisations has proven wrong," Davis said.

"One of the ways it has been proven wrong is because employment in this country has grown despite the forecasts to record levels today. We will be seeking to do the best we can to ensure that growth record is maintained."

Bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of England have raised their forecasts from gloomy predictions made around the time of 2016 referendum. However, Britain's economy has underperformed many of its peers and is likely to lag global growth this year.

— Reuters

British people "did not vote for nothing to change when we come out of the EU", she said. "What we're doing

now is doing the job that the British people asked the government to do, which is to deliver on Brexit." — AFP

GUARD OF SNOWMEN



Re-elected Finnish President Sauli Niinisto (C) heads to inspect the honorary guard outside the Finnish Parliament during presidential inauguration in Helsinki, on Thursday.

Russia launches 11 satellites 'without glitch'

MOSCOW: Russia on Thursday successfully launched 11 satellites from its Vostochny cosmodrome, in the third rocket liftoff from the new spaceport, the space agency said.

The country's first orbital launch of 2018 came after a similar liftoff from the cosmodrome in eastern Russia ended in embarrassment, with officials losing contact with a string of satellites last November.

Lifting off as scheduled earlier on Thursday, the Soyuz rocket carried two Russian Earth monitoring satellites as its primary payload and nine US and German piggyback satellites. During its mission the Fregat upper-stage rocket performed a complex sequence, forming several orbits for the delivery of the satellites, the Roscosmos space agency said.

"In accordance with the flight programme, the Fregat upper-stage placed into orbit space vehicles of main and secondary payloads," the space agency said in a statement.

Both the Soyuz rocket and the upper stage "performed without a glitch," the statement said.

Dmitry Rogozin, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of space, said contact with Russia's Kanopus-V earth monitoring satellites had been established. "Thank you everyone,"

the official tweeted. The second liftoff from the Vostochny cosmodrome ended in failure last November when Russian officials lost contact with a weather satellite hours after its launch.

Apart from the Meteor weather satellite contact had been lost with 18 payloads from institutions and companies in Canada, the United States, Japan, Germany, Sweden and Norway. The glitch was a fresh embarrassment for the country's once-proud space industry which has suffered a series of setbacks over recent years. Officials blamed the accident on a programming error.

Thursday's launch had been initially planned for last December, but was postponed due to the November accident.

In late December, Russia lost contact with Angola's first national telecoms satellite launched from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan but several days later officials said they had restored communication.

The inaugural launch from Vostochny spaceport took place in April 2016, with President Vladimir Putin overseeing the take-off.

It represented a major development for the country's space sector, with the new cosmodrome touted to mark a rebirth of the industry.

— AFP

Jaitley extends sops to poor, squeezes middle class

EYEING POLL: Major health insurance for poor, higher minimum support price and step up of Rs 1 lakh cr as institutional credit for farmers

NEW DELHI: With an eye on the next Lok Sabha elections, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in his 2018-19 budget on Thursday proposed a major health insurance scheme for the poor, a higher minimum support price and a step up of Rs 1 lakh crore as institutional credit for farmers along with a spend of nearly Rs 6 lakh crore on infrastructure development.

To pay for this seeming bout of generosity, albeit with votebanks in mind, the finance minister has mopped up huge sums through three or four simple steps, mostly aimed at the middle class. While providing some sops to salaried individuals and pensioners, it has aimed to raise Rs 11,000 crore by increasing cess on income of individuals, from three to four per cent. Additionally, it has aimed to raise money by imposing a 10 per cent Social Welfare Surcharge on all imported goods.

At the same time, the finance minister has eyed the share-owning and investing class by removing an exemption on long-term capital gains to possibly raise over Rs 36,000 crore in a full year — by taxing at 10 per cent shares held for more than a year, exempting only profit of up to Rs 1 lakh. The stock markets reacted sharply initially to the move, later recovering.

The four per cent health and education cess replaces the 2 per cent cess for primary education and 1 per cent cess for secondary and higher education on individuals and corporates to take care of the needs of education and health of BPL and rural families.

Similarly, the Social Welfare Surcharge of 10 per cent on all customs duties replaces the education cess on imported goods. He also raised the customs duty on mobile phones by 5 per cent to 20 per cent. He also levied a 15 per cent duty on some of the parts and accessories of mobile phones and TV sets to promote creation of more jobs under the "Make in India" programme.

In line with the BJP's poll promise before coming to power in 2014, the Finance Minister announced that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for unannounced kharif crops will be 1.5 times the input cost and stepped up the institutional credit for the sector to Rs 11 lakh crore — 1 lakh crore more than last year.

"Now, we have decided to implement this resolution as a principle for the rest of crops. I am pleased to announce that as per pre-determined



Finance Minister Arun Jaitley holds his briefcase during a photo opportunity as he leaves his office to present the federal budget in the parliament on Thursday. — Reuters

principle, the government has decided to keep MSP for the all unannounced crops of kharif at least at one and half times of their production cost. I am confident that this historic decision will prove an important step towards doubling the income of our farmers," Jaitley said.

The opposition reacted sharply to the government's proposed budget with Congress leader P Chidambaram saying Jaitley had failed the fiscal consolidation test that will have "serious consequences" on the economic growth rate.

CPM leader Sitaram Yechury said the budget was "unconnected to ground realities" and "is a textbook exercise in post-truth". However, the India Inc largely welcomed Jaitley's budget.

Leaving the individual taxation slabs and rates untouched, Jaitley in his last full budget before the 2019 elections proposed to reintroduce a standard deduction of Rs 40,000 for salaried tax payers in lieu of present exemption of transport allowance and reimbursement of miscellaneous medical expenses that will involve a revenue sacrifice of Rs 8,000 crore to benefit 2.5 crore people.

In a bid to help senior citizens, the budget proposes to increase the exemption of interest income on deposits with banks and post offices from Rs 10,000 to 50,000 and there will be no TDS deducted on them. The limit for health insurance premium and medical expenditure will go up to Rs 50,000 from Rs 30,000.

UNION BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

GROWTH/FISCAL DEFICIT

- * GDP growth in 2017/18 seen at 6.7 per cent, 2018/19 growth seen at 7.2 per cent
- * Finance minister says "firmly on path to achieve 8 per cent plus growth soon"
- * 2017/18 fiscal deficit seen at 3.5 per cent of GDP, 2018/19 at 3.3 per cent, 2019/20 at 3.1 per cent and 2020/21 at 3.0 per cent

EXPENDITURE

- * Revised expenditure for 2017/18 at 21.57 trillion rupees
- * Total expenditure for 2018/19 seen at 24.42 trillion rupees
- * Revenue expenditure seen at 21.42 trillion rupees, capital expenditure through budget at 3 trillion rupees in 2018/19
- * Defence sector outlay seen at 2.83 trillion rupees in 2018/19, 1.38 trillion rupees for health, education and social security
- * Railway capital expenditure set at 1.49 trillion rupees for 2018/19

TAXATION

- * To reduce corporate tax to 25 per cent for companies which report turnover of up to 2.5 billion rupees as of 2016/17
- * No change in structure of income tax rates for individuals, allows standard deductions of 40,000 rupees

for salaried employees in lieu of transport allowance and miscellaneous medical expenses

* Senior citizens get higher exemptions on incomes from interest on bank deposits, health insurance premium

* Proposes 10 per cent long-term capital gains tax on listed equities from February 1 on gains exceeding 100,000 rupees

* Proposes to raise import tax on mobile phones to 20 per cent from 15 per cent, on some of their parts and accessories to 15 per cent and certain TV parts to 15 per cent

* To raise health and education cess to 4 per cent from 3 per cent

HEALTH/POLLUTION

* To provide 500,000 rupees per family annually for medical reimbursement under National Health Protection Scheme

* Finance minister says the plan will protect 500 million poor people and will be world's largest health protection scheme

* To implement special schemes for state governments around Delhi to address air pollution

* Removal of crop residue to be subsidized in order to tackle the problem of pollution due to burning of crop residue. — Reuters

For certain illnesses, in case of senior citizens and very senior citizens, the limit will go up to Rs 60,000 and Rs 80,000 respectively. The concessions will cost the government Rs 4,000 crore.

In keeping with his earlier an-

nouncement of reducing corporate taxation rate, the Finance Minister reduced the rate for all companies with turnover of up to Rs 250 crore, up from Rs 50 crore. He said this would take care of almost 99 per cent of the companies and would have a negative

impact of Rs 7,000 crore on government finances. Only about 250 companies would have a turnover above the cut-off level and would continue to pay 30 per cent tax. An ID on lines of Aadhaar would also be set up for companies, Jaitley said.

For the Railways, whose budget was merged with the general budget since last year, the capital expenditure has been fixed at Rs 1,48,528 crore for 2018-19 with a large part devoted to capacity creation. Some 18,000 km of doubling, third and fourth line works and 5,000 km of gauge conversion will be taken up to transform almost the entire network into broad gauge.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the Finance Minister for presenting an all-friendly budget 2018-19 with the focus on agriculture, health and small businesses. "This budget is farmer-friendly, common citizen-friendly, business environment-friendly and development-friendly."

Announcing the flagship National Health Protection Scheme, which he billed as the world's largest government funded healthcare programme, Jaitley said the government proposed to cover over 10 crore poor and vulnerable families (approximately 50 crore beneficiaries) providing coverage up to Rs 5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation.

In another populist measure, the Finance Minister announced that as part of Prime Minister's Ujjwala Scheme the government proposed to increase the target of providing free

LPG connections to eight crore poor women, three crore up from the original target.

He said the focus of the government in the next fiscal will be on providing maximum livelihood opportunities in the rural areas by spending more on livelihood, agriculture and allied activities and construction of rural infrastructure.

"In the year 2018-19, for creation of livelihood and infrastructure in rural areas, total amount to be spent by the ministries will be Rs 14.34 lakh crore, including extra-budgetary and non-budgetary resources of Rs 11.98 lakh crore. Apart from employment due to farming activities and self employment, this expenditure will create employment of 321 crore person days, 3.17 lakh km of rural roads, 51 lakh new rural houses, 1.88 crore toilets, and provide 1.75 crore new household electric connections besides boosting agricultural growth."

In a labour welfare measure, the minister announced extension of contribution of 8.33 per cent of employee provident fund for new employees by the government for three years to all the sectors and raised it to 12 per cent.

In order to create employment and aid growth, the Finance Minister said, the government's estimated budgetary and extra budgetary expenditure on infrastructure for 2018-19 was being increased to Rs 5.97 lakh crore against estimated expenditure of Rs 4.94 lakh crore last year.

The Finance Minister indicated a slippage in fiscal deficit for the current year revising it from 3.2 per cent to 3.5 per cent and from 3 per cent to 3.3 per cent (Rs 5.95 lakh crore) of the GDP next year, implying that the government will be borrowing more to balance its books.

The government has set a target of Rs 80,000 crore divestment target for 2018-19, the finance minister said adding that target for 2018-19 had exceeded the target of Rs 72,500 crore and would touch Rs 1 lakh crore. Despite that, he did keep his aim low for the next year. He announced that the three public sector insurance companies would be merged. The merged entity is expected to be listed at some stage.

The minister started his speech by reading out the achievements made by the government, saying: "We're now a \$2.5 trillion economy, and we are firmly on path to achieve 8 per cent plus growth soon. — IANS

Mega healthcare scheme a 'jumla', says Congress

NEW DELHI: The Congress on Thursday slammed the Union Budget, terming the promise of Rs 5 lakh for healthcare for poor families as "a big jumla", and said there was "tokenism" on creating jobs and nothing to indicate rise in farmers income.

Congress leader and former Finance Minister P Chidambaram (pictured) told reporters here that the Budget had no tax relief to the average tax payer and no measures to boost exports. He also expressed his deep disappointment about some major schemes having reduced outlays.

Referring to Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's Budget speech in which he said the government will launch a flagship national health protection scheme to cover 10 crore poor and vulnerable families, Chidambaram said it will entail huge expenditure but no money has been provided for it by the government.

"The promise of Rs 5 lakh per family for secondary and tertiary healthcare is a big jumla. The target group is 10 crore families. Assuming each family will avail of Rs 50,000 — one tenth of Rs 5 lakh — the amount required per year will be Rs 5 lakh crore," he said.

He said if the insurance companies will foot the bill, the estimated premium at Rs 5,000 to Rs 15,000 per family will require an outgo from Rs 50,000 crore to Rs 1.5 lakh crore per year. "Is the Finance Minister serious?" he asked.

"Where is money provided? Money has not been provided even for paying the premium," Chidambaram said, adding that Jaitley and the NDA gov-



ernment had touted it as the world's biggest healthcare scheme.

The Congress leader said he did not hear any measures to boost exports in the Budget speech. "Because the government has run out of ideas to boost exports, the Finance Minister has imposed additional customs duties. The Prime Minister's speech and the spirit of Davos has been forgotten within a few days," he said.

Chidambaram said there is a promise to increase the minimum support price (MSP) 1.5 times but there were no details.

"The Swaminathan committee has been remembered in the last year of government's tenure. Besides, Rs 2,000 crore for e-markets and Rs 500 crore for operation Green, whenever the cabinet will approve the schemes, amounts to a pittance. There is nothing to indicate that farmers real income will rise," he said.

The Congress leader said that agriculture distress will continue and deepen, "putting in peril lives of majority of people primarily dependent on agriculture". — IANS

India Inc hails 'populist' Budget, but says disappointed on tax front

NEW DELHI: India Inc on Thursday welcomed the Union Budget 2018-19 — the last full budget of Finance Minister Arun Jaitley before the 2019 general elections — and praised the populist approach of focusing on infrastructure and rural India.

However, what came as disappointment for the industry was that the government did not provide any relief in the income tax rates for 2018-19, along with the imposition of long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on equities exceeding Rs 1 lakh at 10 per cent.

Here is what the industry players have to say:

Sandeep Jadodia, President, Assocham: "Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has placed a huge emphasis on agriculture and rural India, allocating bulk of resources to interior landscape, while helping the middle class, salaried employees along with relief to senior citizens, measures which would boost consumer demand and help revive economic growth."

Chanda Kochhar, MD and CEO, ICICI Bank: "The wide-ranging measures announced for various segments of the rural economy will boost income levels and create gainful and sustainable employment. This, in turn,



will help increase consumption levels in the economy."

Anshuman Magazine, Chairman, India and South East Asia, CBRE: "It is fair to say that this year's budget is populist, focusing on providing social security at the grass-roots level. The various announcements and funding provided are towards promoting further growth of small-scale industries as well as improving infrastructure, particularly across rural India."

Neeru Ahuja, Partner, Deloitte India: "On the taxation side, industry and

individuals are a little disappointed that no significant tax relief has been provided in spite of increased compliance by taxpayers. Even the standard deduction given is in lieu of two other deductions that have been taken away."

K Suresh, President, Association of National Exchanges Members of India: "While the tax (LTCG) will adversely affect serious investors funding the India Growth story, it won't have any impact on short-term traders. Instead of introducing LTCG in its current form, the government could have done bet-

ter by changing the tenure of this tax or given the corresponding benefit by re-introducing 88E to take the deduction of STT (Securities Transaction Tax)"

Joy Rankothge, Vice President, Credit Strategy, Moody's Investors Service: "The direction of the fiscal deficit announced in the Budget is in line with our forecasts. The government continues to aim for a gradual narrowing of the central government deficit to 3.5 per cent and 3.3 per cent in fiscal 2018 and 2019. We expect that the fiscal deficit targets will be broadly achieved."

"This year's divestments exceeding targets marks a break in a recent trend of missing ambitious targets. Moving forward, increased divestments could contribute to higher government revenues, greater efficiencies within state-owned enterprises and help reduce the government's high debt burden."

Manish Agarwal, Partner and Leader-Infrastructure, PwC India: "Rs 50 lakh crore for infrastructure is welcome as it reaffirms continued funding of various initiatives in roads, railways and urban infrastructure. Quantum leap in airport capacity is a key requirement to keep pace with the rapid growth in aviation. — IANS



In this file photo, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is seen with acting US Secretary of State Tom Shannon while delivering remarks to Department of State employees upon arrival at the Department of State in Washington on February 2, 2017. — Reuters

No 3 US diplomat quits in latest departure under Trump

WASHINGTON: The US State Department's third-ranking official, Tom Shannon, is stepping down from his post, the department said on Thursday, becoming the latest senior diplomat to exit since President Donald Trump took office a year ago.

Shannon, who serves as under-secretary of state for political affairs, is the top US career diplomat and has been a fixture among the nation's diplomatic ranks during more than 34 years of service. In a letter to department staff, Shannon, 60, said he was resigning for personal reasons.

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said Shannon agreed to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's request that he stay on until his successor is named. Nauert said Shannon had served under six presidents and 10 secretaries of state.

"My decision is personal, and driven by a desire to attend to my family, take stock of my life, and set a new direction for my remaining years," Shannon wrote.

His departure deprives the State Department of a seasoned veteran

at a time of pressing diplomatic concerns including the threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Tillerson in November said he was offended by claims that the State Department was being hollowed out under Trump, saying it was functioning well despite scathing criticism from former American diplomats including Nicholas Burns and Ryan Crocker.

The forcing out of many senior diplomats, the failure to nominate or to win Senate confirmation for officials to fill key agency roles, and a perception that Tillerson is inaccessible have eroded morale, according to current officials.

Shannon's departure is part of a steady stream of senior career diplomatic officers to leave since Trump became president in January 2017. His departure was first reported by the Associated Press.

Trump kept Shannon on board when he assumed the presidency and must now appoint a successor who would need Senate confirmation.

— Reuters

Kenya court suspends govt shutdown of three TV stations

UNPRECEDENTED MOVE: Govt was angered by coverage of opposition leader Odinga

NAIROBI: A Kenyan court on Thursday suspended a government shutdown of three TV channels that was prompted by their coverage of opposition leader Raila Odinga's symbolic presidential inauguration this week, one of the channels reported.

NTV Kenya, three of whose journalists said they had spent the night in their newsroom in fear of arrest, said on its Twitter feed that the privately owned broadcasters were expected back on air after the High Court ruling.

"Government expected to restore NTV, Citizen TV & KTN News signals after High Court suspends switch off for 14 days pending case being heard," it tweeted.

The government shut down the TV channels on Tuesday as they began coverage of a rally during which Odinga — who says last year's elections, won by President Uhuru Kenyatta, were rigged — declared himself president in a brief, symbolic ceremony.

The shutdown, unprecedented in Kenya's democratic era, prompted fierce public criticism and raised fears the country was reverting to the censorship that characterised decades of repressive one-party rule under strongman Daniel arap Moi.

The court's decision — to suspend the shutdown for two weeks while a case challenging the legality of the government's action is heard — will boost the newly-independent judiciary's image in East Africa's regional powerhouse and wealthiest economy.

Court officials were not immediately available for comment.

The government's attempted censorship made global headlines about a



A man sits in a control centre of the NTV channel at the Nation group media building in Nairobi on Thursday. — Reuters

country that is valued by investors for its stability, relative freedom and steady economic growth.

"This is clearly a slide to dictatorship. It's a return to a repressive period we had forgotten about," NTV journalist Larry Madowo said. "We are becoming another African country."

NTV journalist Ken Mijungu said that he and colleagues Madowo and Linus Kaikai had all been warned by security sources on Wednesday that their arrest was imminent.

In African states with entrenched rulers such as the Democratic Republic

of Congo and Cameroon, governments have asked telecommunications companies to block social media, mainly during elections and protests.

On Wednesday, the Kenyan government had said the TV stations would stay off air indefinitely.

Interior Minister Fred Matiang'i accused media organisations of facilitating Odinga's "illegal act", which he said put the lives of thousands of Kenyans at risk.

Clashes between Odinga supporters and security forces claimed around 100 lives during the election season. Al-

most all were killed by the police.

Also on Wednesday, police arrested opposition lawmaker Tom Kajwang for illegally administering Odinga's "oath". He was expected to be charged on Thursday oath but was taken out of court by police before the charges were read.

Kenyatta won an August 8 election that was later nullified by the Supreme Court over irregularities. A repeat election was held on October 26, but Odinga boycotted it because he said the electoral commission had made insufficient reforms.

— Reuters

Jailed Catalan leaders lodge case with UN

LONDON: Three Catalan independence leaders being held in pre-trial detention have lodged a complaint against their imprisonment with a UN panel, hoping to exert pressure on Madrid to free them, lawyers said on Thursday.

The former deputy leader of the Catalan regional government and leaders of two separatist groups are accused of sedition in their bid to declare Catalonia independent from Spain.

While other figures behind last year's referendum and independence declaration — both acts declared illegal under Spain's constitution — fled to Brussels, Oriol Junqueras, Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart were arrested and denied bail pending their trial.

A judgement from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, a panel of human rights experts, would not be legally binding, but lawyers said it would be a way of applying pressure on the Spanish state.

"This case does not ask the UN



Ben Emmerson and Rachel Lindon, lawyers of three jailed Catalan leaders, speak during a press conference in London on Thursday. — Reuters

to adjudicate on the issue of Catalan independence, but seeks the UN's reaffirmation that governments cannot repress political dissent through arbitrary detention," Ben Emmerson, acting for the three, told a news conference in London.

The Catalan leaders planned other

legal challenges, he said.

Spain fell sharply in a recent annual Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit, which cited Spain's use of force in an attempt to stop the referendum going ahead and a repressive treatment of secessionist politicians.

"This kind of political oppression belongs to a bygone era in Spain's history," Emmerson said, referring to Spain's dictatorial past under General Francisco Franco.

The independence drive has split loyalties in the wealthy northeastern region and caused resentment in much of the rest of Spain, as well as tarnishing the image of Spain's four-decade-old democracy abroad.

After imposing direct rule on Catalonia in October, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called regional elections in December to try to defuse a crisis that threatened to split the country.

But his gamble backfired when separatist parties won a majority, giving new impetus to the independence movement, led by Carles Puigdemont, who remains a fugitive from justice in Belgium.

Rajoy's office was not immediately available for comment on Thursday.

— Reuters

Disregarding FBI, White House may release Republican memo

WASHINGTON: A secret Republican memo alleging FBI bias against President Donald Trump was likely to be released on Thursday, a Trump administration official said, a move that would put the White House in direct confrontation with the top US law enforcement agency.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a rare rebuke on Wednesday to the president and his fellow Republicans in Congress who are pushing to release the four-page document crafted by Republican members of the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee.

"The FBI was provided a limited opportunity to review this memo the day before the committee voted to release it," the FBI said in a statement. "As expressed during our initial review, we have grave concerns about material omissions of fact that fundamentally impact the memo's accuracy."

Justice Department officials have also said releasing the memo could

jeopardise classified information.

The administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity on Wednesday night, did not elaborate on the expected release.

The fight over the memo reflects a wider battle over Special Counsel Robert Mueller's criminal probe into potential collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia to help him win the 2016 presidential election. Russia and Trump have both denied the allegations.

Mueller's investigation and the FBI probe that preceded it have hung over Trump's year-old presidency.

Democrats say the four-page memo is misleading, based on a selective use of highly classified data and intended to discredit Mueller's investigation.

Representative Devin Nunes, the intelligence committee's Republican chairman who commissioned the document, dismissed the objections to its release as "spurious."

— Reuters

Potential blood test for Alzheimer's shows early promise

TOKYO/MELBOURNE: Researchers in Japan and Australia say they have made important progress in developing a blood test that could in future help doctors detect who might go on to get Alzheimer's disease.

In a study published in the journal *Nature*, the scientists said the test, which can detect a toxic protein known as amyloid beta, linked to Alzheimer's, was more than 90 per cent accurate in research involving around 370 people.

Dementia, of which Alzheimer's is the most common form, affects close to 50 million people worldwide and is expected to affect more than 131 million by 2050, according to the non-profit campaign group Alzheimer's Disease International.

Currently, doctors use brain scans or invasive cerebrospinal fluid testing, also known as a spinal tap, to try and

Scientists said the test, which can detect a toxic protein known as amyloid beta, linked to Alzheimer's, was more than 90 per cent accurate in research involving around 370 people

see whether patients have a build up of amyloid beta in the brain. But these tests are invasive, expensive and may only show results when the disease has already started to progress.

Despite decades of scientific research, there is no treatment that can slow the progression of Alzheimer's.



Current drugs can do no more than ease some of the symptoms.

Having a simple, low-cost blood test could make it easier for pharmaceutical companies to find enough

people at risk of developing Alzheimer's to test potential new drugs to fight the disease, said Katsuhiko Yanagisawa, who co-led the *Nature* study at the Japanese National Center for Geri-

iatrics and Gerontology.

Since Alzheimer's disease is thought to start developing years before patients have any symptoms of memory loss, experts say an important factor in finding an effective treatment will be the ability to accurately detect signs of the disease early.

"You have got to walk before you run. You have to learn to diagnose the disease directly before you can hope to see the effect of therapeutic intervention. And that's where the real value in this test will come," said Colin Masters, a professor at the University of Melbourne who co-led the research.

The study involved 252 Australian and 121 Japanese patients aged between 60 and 90 years.

Scientists not directly involved in the study said it made an important step, but now needed to be replicated.

"If (it) can be repeated in a larger number of people, this test will give us an insight into changes occurring in the brain that relate to Alzheimer's disease," said Mark Dallas, a lecturer in Cellular and Molecular Neuroscience at Britain's University of Reading.

Abdul Hye at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience said the test was still a long way from being able to be used in doctors' clinics.

"The approach of obtaining the results is still very complicated (and) in its current form, the methodology is not practical in a clinical setting," he said.

John Hardy, a professor of neuroscience at University College London, said it was a "hopeful study which could have a very positive impact on diagnostic accuracy."

— Reuters

After legal setbacks, Trump races to Supreme Court

ANDREW CHUNG

When President Donald Trump's administration took its fight to end a controversial immigration programme directly to the US Supreme Court last month, skipping over a California federal appeals court in the process, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said it was a "rare step" to ensure a quick and fair resolution.

But the fast trip to the nation's highest judicial body was not the first time the administration took the unusual route of circumventing liberal-leaning lower courts and heading straight to the conservative-majority Supreme Court for relief from legal setbacks.

In the last year, the Justice Department sought to bypass lower courts four times using varying legal procedures in several high-profile cases, most recently to defend the administration's right to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, programme.

It also skipped the normal legal process in a fight over whether pregnant immigrant teens held in detention can obtain abortions. And it asked the Supreme Court to quickly intervene in its defence of the president's travel bans, which primarily affected people from several Muslim-majority countries.

"It's unusual; it is stretching the boundaries," said Kevin Russell, a Washington, DC attorney who

has argued frequently before the Supreme Court and worked in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The strategy makes sense, some legal scholars say, for an administration that has seen so many of its key policy initiatives challenged aggressively by political opponents, who often file in courts where they are likely to find sympathetic judges.

Administration officials "think they'll do better in the Supreme Court because it is more conservative than the average circuit (appeals) court," said John McGinnis, a professor at the Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law.

While major, fast-moving cases often reach the Supreme Court quickly through expedited lower court rulings followed by appeals, skipping steps in the process is rare, many legal scholars said.

Precisely quantifying the number of times previous administrations have bypassed lower courts is difficult, given the volume of matters brought to the Supreme Court and the numerous ways in which cases can be appealed. But the last time the high court decided a case officially filed in advance of judgement by an appeals court was in 2005. That case, during the George W Bush administration, involved a challenge to criminal sentencing guidelines, not a presidential policy.

Attempts to bypass lower courts are generally

The fast trip to the nation's highest judicial body was not the first time the US administration took the unusual route of circumventing liberal-leaning lower courts

considered long-shots, as the court only takes up such requests when the case is deemed to be of "imperative public importance" warranting immediate review.

A Justice Department official said in a statement that the government seeks emergency relief only when necessary. "The bottom line is we are careful in what we ask for," the official said.

The department has not sought Supreme Court review of every major ruling that went against it in lower courts.

The Trump administration's Supreme Court strategy has grown out of repeated setbacks at the district and circuit court levels.

Many of Trump's most significant executive actions, in areas including immigration, energy and the environment, have been at least temporarily blocked by courts.

The rulings have often been applied nationwide, not just where the lawsuits were filed.

In the DACA case, for example, a San Francisco judge issued an order on January 9 that blocked the government from rescinding the programme, which had protected from deportation nearly 800,000 young people brought illegally to the United States by their parents. A variety of states, individuals and organisations sued after Trump decided last year to rescind DACA, effective in March.

The other cases taken directly to the Supreme Court by the administration also came after district courts moved to impede key Trump policies or actions. In November, the administration asked the high court to halt an order by a Maryland federal judge blocking Trump's revised travel ban, preempting review by the 4th US Circuit Court of Appeals. It bypassed the 9th Circuit in asking the Supreme Court to clarify its own ruling from last June over Trump's previous, now-expired, travel ban.

— Reuters

US-Russia collusion probe

Developments in Robert Mueller's inquiry into Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections

Questions

Donald Trump

Won the 2016 US presidential election

Said he is willing to be questioned under oath. Reportedly plans to release a secret memo that could discredit the probe for bias

Jeff Sessions

US attorney general picked by Trump

First member of Trump's cabinet to be questioned in Mueller's probe

Steve Bannon

Trump's chief White House strategist until Aug 2017

US media reported in January that Mueller had subpoenaed him

Indictments

Michael Flynn

Trump's ex-national security adviser

Pleaded guilty December 1 to lying to the FBI about talks in 2016 with then Russian ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak

George Papadopoulos

Ex-foreign policy advisor on the Trump campaign

Pleaded guilty on October 5 to lying to the FBI about Kremlin-related contacts

Paul Manafort

Trump's 2016 nomination campaign manager

Indicted October 27. Pleaded not guilty to conspiracy against the US, money laundering, several other charges

Rick Gates

Manafort's deputy in the nomination campaign

Indicted October 27. Pleaded not guilty to conspiracy

© AFP

A BALANCING ACT

AMIT KAPOOR AND CHIRAG YADAV

The Indian Budget is finally out and to put it simply, Arun Jaitley did not disappoint.

In fact, a majority of it was along expected lines. Most importantly, as promised, the government managed to do a commendable job of balancing economic populism with prudent economics.

However, as is always the case, the good did come with a tinge of bad.

It was a no-brainer that the Budget would focus on the agricultural sector after BJP's electoral performance in rural Gujarat.

Jaitley went a step further and, in a major departure from the past, began his Budget speech with the government's plan for the farming community.

He unveiled a litany of measures in line with the government's aim of doubling farmer incomes by 2022.

First, the Budget allowed for setting the minimum support price (MSP) at 1.5 times the production cost for kharif crops. Even though this support to farmers will help increase their incomes, there are two questions that need to be asked. Will the effect of this jump in MSP be inflationary? Also, will it take away the incentive to reduce production costs? The answer to both of these questions is probably in the affirmative.

Only time will tell if the move has any such negative externalities for the economy, but the government should be prepared with commensurate remedies to tackle the eventuality.

The second significant move on the agricultural front has been a push to boost agri-business activities across the country and improve agricultural markets. Allocation has been doubled for enhancing food processing and specialised agro-processing networks from Rs 700 crores to Rs 1,400 crores. The government has also decided to follow a cluster-based approach for stimulating agricultural production.

Further, in a bid to formalise agricultural markets, the 470 Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) promoted markets would be connected to the e-nam market platform and over 22,000 rural agricultural markets would also be developed.

These are positive moves to remove the middle man and ensure farmers receive the bulk of the prices paid by the consumer.

However, the e-nam platform is still in its formative stage and its performance has not been adequately tested. A bulk of the sale of agricultural products is still done through commission agents and it is doubtful that the practice will be done away with any time soon. — IANS

Dhaka slums fight fires but problems loom

AZ MANAS

Bilkis Begum has lived on the lakeside in Dhaka's Korail slum for 16 years, but in December 2016, her extended family's 12 houses were razed to the ground by a fire.

The inferno destroyed the oven her husband, Shahid Gazi, used for his bakery and the fridges he relied on for his business selling leftover chicken meat from Chinese restaurants.

For the Gazis, it was a struggle to cobble together the \$3,000 they needed to rebuild their homes and business.

They borrowed \$900 from moneylenders, and found the rest from relatives and friends.

They also got tin, pillars and a little cash aid from Bangladesh-based development agency BRAC. In addition, they received pro-bono help from architects like Sheikh Rubaiya Sultana, who helped redesign the neighbourhood to protect it better against future fires.

"Architects have social responsibility," said Sultana, an assistant professor at BRAC University in Dhaka. "I watched the fire before my very eyes, but couldn't do anything then."

The Gazi family now has eight new units and the couple are back in business, running a small restaurant on the old site.

"We couldn't have stood back on our own feet unless we got (this) support," said Begum, 32, a mother of three.

A team of 16 architects, planners, engineers and students, brought together by BRAC, has tested out simple, cheap design solutions to rebuild Dhaka's two biggest slums after fires destroyed some 650 homes in late 2016, affecting 2,500

people. The new approach aims to tackle the ever-present threat of fires in Dhaka's crowded slums, while improving living conditions for residents.

But in a city where less than 10 per cent of areas are planned, altering the slumscape is a tall order.

One major challenge is working out what is feasible for slum residents who have no legal rights to the land they live on.

Ashekur Rahman, an urban programme specialist with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bangladesh, said the transitory existence of

In a city like Dhaka where less than 10 per cent of areas are planned, altering the slumscape is a tall order

many slum dwellers is a major impediment to keeping them safe from threats like fires in the longer term.

Many are seasonal migrants who split their time between villages and cities, limiting their access to services and permanent accommodation.

Government providers worry that improving services in informal settlements could attract more migrants from rural areas, Rahman said.

"Weak and ill-defined land tenure

and property rights pose big threats to resilience-building and are considered the underlying causes of the poverty and vulnerability of the urban poor in Bangladesh," he added.

Sandwiched between Dhaka's upscale Gulshan and Banani neighbourhoods, Korail — which sprang up in the 1980s — sprawls over some 170 acres of land owned by three government ministries.

It is home to as many as 100,000 residents, including rickshaw drivers, domestic helpers, garment workers and small traders. Fire is just one of the threats inhabitants face on a daily basis, which include eviction, drugs, crime, police harassment and extortion.

After digitally mapping the fire-hit areas, the design team led by Dhaka-based J A Architects Ltd consulted with residents who each agreed to give up a tiny amount of space to widen access roads and narrow lanes so that fire trucks and ambulances could enter if another blaze breaks out.

The group of experts was appalled by the unhygienic conditions in the slums.

In summer, the tin shacks are "like ovens", said Shamim Hossain, Manager with BRAC's urban development programme. To improve living conditions, the team made modifications to dwellings, such as adding windows, wire netting and transparent plastic to let in air and light.

They also helped rebuild homes in Sattola slum, which suffered a major fire in December 2016 too, destroying 115 homes in just 10 minutes.

Made homeless overnight, residents had to pass more than three cold winter months under the open sky. — Reuters

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'SUPER' VOLCANO: The 'super blue blood moon' obscured by clouds illuminates Mayon volcano as it spews ash near Legazpi City, Albay province, Philippines, early on Thursday. — AFP



DREADED REMNANT: Bomb disposal expert Adam Roberts rests his foot on a defused US-made bomb dropped during World War II a day after it was discovered on a harbourfront construction site in the Wan Chai district of Hong Kong on Thursday. — AFP

Super Mario ready for leap into anime film

TOKYO: Japan's Nintendo on Thursday said it was working on an anime movie starring its iconic video game character Super Mario in collaboration with the US studio behind the "Despicable Me" series.

Shigeru Miyamoto, the renowned game creator of "Super Mario Bros" and "Donkey Kong" at the Kyoto-based video game giant, has been working with Chris Meledandri at Illumination Entertainment to produce the Mario anime.

"People have told me making games is similar to making movies and I've been flattered by people saying things like 'If you can make a game,

you can make a movie," Miyamoto told reporters in Tokyo.

"But they are totally different," said the creator who has some previous experience in directing short movies.

"One is interactive and the other is a passive experience," he said, noting film-making requires film-making experts and Meledandri was an "experienced producer."

In the past decade, Meledandri has produced the "Despicable Me" series, "The Secret Life of Pets" and other box office hits.

"I got along with him. But it took more than two years to make an announcement since we agreed to do



something together," he said.

Miyamoto said he and Meledandri had already made progress in production though the release date is yet to be fixed.

He said they would scrap the project if they decided they were unable to make an "entertaining" film, he said.

"We've already discussed its script many times and have made quite a lot of progress... between the two of us," he said.

Once done, the film will be distributed by Universal Pictures, Miyamoto said.

The announcement came the day after Nintendo posted stellar earnings thanks to strong sales of its new Switch console and software titles.

Global sales of the Super Mario Odyssey title for Switch topped nine million since its launch last October.

Miyamoto told the briefing that the company's "ultimate goal" is that everyone would have a Switch console for their personal use.

Nintendo also said it was planning to release a new Mario Kart title for smartphones in the year from April.

There was a Hollywood live-action film with Super Mario characters in 1993 but it scored limited success at the box office. — AFP



CAUTIOUS STEPS: A worker walks on a temporary platform at a construction site in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Thursday. — Reuters



PLAYING HOST: A bellboy pushes a trolley loaded with hotel guests' baggage past a Pomeranian-shaped statue on display at a hotel, ahead of the Chinese Lunar New Year of the Dog in Metro Manila, Philippines, on Thursday. — Reuters



'COINING' NEW IMAGE: Artists Daria Marchenko and Daniel D Green pose in front of their portrait of US President Donald Trump made of coins and casino tokens in a classroom in New York, on Wednesday. — Reuters



NEW-FOUND GETAWAY: Young boys swim in a road under repair in Tondo district, Metro Manila, Philippines, on Thursday. — Reuters



RINGING IN NEW YEAR: Workers install red lanterns ahead of the Chinese Lunar New Year or Spring festival, at a tourist attraction in Linyi, Shandong province, China. — Reuters

business

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US PRIVATE PAYROLLS RISE STRONGLY; WAGE GROWTH PICKING UP P12

OGC PARTICIPATES IN MUSCAT MARATHON P12

PREMIUM PRODUCTS TAKE CENTRE STAGE AT LG INNOFEST 2018 P12

BIZ BUZZ

UK house prices pick up in January



LONDON: British house prices grew more strongly than expected in January but there is little sign of a sustained pick-up as households continue to feel the pinch from the Brexit hit to their finances, mortgage lender Nationwide said on Thursday.

Prices rose by an annual 3.2 per cent, up from 2.6 per cent in December and stronger than a median forecast of 2.5 per cent in a Reuters poll of economists.

The increase was the biggest since March 2017 although it remained below growth of about 5 per cent in Nationwide's index at the time of the June 2016 referendum decision to leave the European Union. — **Reuters**

Unilever posts 2017 profits of \$8.05bn



THE HAGUE: Food and consumer products giant Unilever on Thursday posted soaring 2017 profits of 6.5 billion euros (\$8.05 billion), after a year of “major change” when it spurned a Kraft Heinz takeover bid.

Net profit leaped 16.9 per cent on sales of 53.7 billion euros, up 1.9 per cent year-on-year, which chief executive Paul Polman said “demonstrates the progress we have made in transforming Unilever into a more resilient and more agile business”. The Rotterdam-based Unilever, which employs some 169,000 people around the world, owns more than 400 household brands including Dove, Knorr soups, Lipton, Magnum and Marmite. — **AFP**

Fed leaves rates unchanged, sees inflation rising

WASHINGTON: The US Federal Reserve kept interest rates unchanged but said inflation likely would rise this year, bolstering expectations borrowing costs will continue to climb under incoming central bank chief Jerome Powell.

Citing solid gains in employment, household spending and capital investment, the Fed said it expected the economy to expand at a moderate pace and the labour market to remain strong in 2018.

“Inflation on a 12-month basis is expected to move up this year and to stabilise” around the Fed's 2 per cent target over the medium term, the central bank said in a statement following a two-day policy meeting, the last under Fed Chair Janet Yellen.

It also said its rate-setting committee had unanimously selected Powell to succeed Yellen, effective February 3. Powell, a Fed governor who has worked closely with Yellen, was nominated by President Donald Trump and confirmed by the US Senate. Powell is expected to hew closely to the policies embraced by Yellen, who spearheaded the gradual move away from the near-zero interest rates adopted to nurse the economy back to health. — **Reuters**

Asian factories kick off 2018 on strong note



A labourer works inside an electronics factory in Qingdao, Shandong province, China. — **Reuters**

HONG KONG: Asia's factories got off to a strong start in 2018, with manufacturing activity in many countries gaining momentum and hitting multi-year highs as global demand for hi-tech products remained strong.

Business surveys in Europe and the United States are also expected to show solid factory activity, reinforcing expectations of another year of synchronised global growth that has propelled stock markets to record highs.

Global policymakers are hoping that rosy scenario may finally translate into higher wages, spurring stronger domestic demand and inflation, which has been strangely absent from the recovery so far despite years of massive central bank monetary stimulus.

The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday that inflation was likely to pick up this year, bolstering expectations that US interest rates will continue to rise, while the Bank of England said price growth was back on the agenda.

But official inflation data in Asia has remained tepid, even as business surveys suggest companies are charging their customers more to recoup rising input costs.

- * Japan factory reading at 4-year high
- * Taiwan near 7-year high
- * Activity remains strong in China, rebounds in S Korea

South Korea on Thursday posted its lowest inflation rate in 17 months, and prices are growing less than expected in Australia and New Zealand.

“The pick-up in manufacturing activity does not necessarily have to reflect in domestic inflationary pressures as they include non-tradeable sectors,” said Trinh Nguyen, senior economist at Natixis in Hong Kong. In light of the subdued South Korean inflation data, ING economists cut their forecasts for rate hikes in that country this year to only one from two previously, and not until the fourth quarter.

The strongest manufacturing readings in Asia on Thursday came from tech exporters, which continue to ride a robust semiconductor cycle driven by

upgrades in smartphones, industrial robots, cars, and, more recently, demand for computing machines used to mine cryptocurrencies like bitcoin. In Japan, the Markit/Nikkei Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) rose to 54.8 in January, the highest in four years.

Taiwan's reading rose to its highest since April 2011, while South Korean factory activity bounced back into expansion territory as domestic and export orders picked up. Levels above 50 suggest growth on a monthly basis.

Even in China — where authorities are cracking down on air pollution and excessive financial risks — factory growth last month appeared generally resilient, though economists agree the crackdowns will start to weigh on activity eventually.

The private Caixin/Markit PMI was steady at 51.5, matching December's reading and better than economists at expected, though official data on Wednesday suggested a slight softening as export orders faltered.

A clearer picture of China's manufacturing activity and its actual demand may not emerge until spring when winter smog restrictions are lifted and construction revives. — **Reuters**

Fujifilm to take over Xerox in \$6.1 bn deal, create JV

NEW YORK: Japan's Fujifilm Holdings is set to take over Xerox Corp in a \$6.1 billion deal, combining the US company into their existing joint venture to gain scale and cut costs amid declining demand for office printing.

The acquisition announced on Wednesday comes as Xerox has been under pressure to find new sources of growth as it struggles to reinvent its legacy business amid waning demand for office printing. Fujifilm is also trying to streamline its copier business with a larger focus on document solutions services. Consolidation of R&D, procurement and other operations would enable Fuji Xerox to deliver at least \$1.7 billion in total cost savings by 2022, the two companies said.

Fujifilm now owns 75 per cent of Fuji Xerox, the joint venture going back more than 50 years ago which sells photocopying products and services in the Asia-Pacific region.

The two companies said that Fuji Xerox will buy back that stake from Fujifilm for around \$6.1 billion, using bank debt. Fujifilm will use those proceeds to purchase 50.1 per cent of new Xerox shares. Plans were for the deal to be completed around July-August, they added. — **Reuters**

keep the Fuji Xerox name and become a subsidiary of Fujifilm, with dual headquarters in the United States and Japan, and listed in New York. It will be led by Xerox CEO Jeff Jacobson, while Fujifilm CEO Shigetaka Komori will serve as chairman.

The joint venture accounts for nearly half of Fujifilm's sales and operating profit.

Both companies have struggled with slow sales of photocopy products, as businesses increasingly go paperless. Fujifilm on Wednesday reported a 29.4 per cent drop in operating profit at its document solutions operations, which includes Fuji Xerox, for the third quarter, under-performing its imaging and information segments. Overall, the company reported a 3.4 per cent increase in operating profit for the quarter.

Xerox reported a net loss from continuing operations of \$196 million in the fourth quarter, mainly due to a one-off \$400 million charge as it sought to take advantage of changes to US tax law but also reflecting the steady decline in office printing.

“This has been a speedy decision, but I believe it's a creative one,” Fujifilm CEO Komori told reporters at a briefing. — **Reuters**



Fujifilm Holdings' logos are pictured ahead of its news conference in Tokyo. — **Reuters**

Shell reported a more than doubling of profit in 2017 to \$16bn, the highest since the start of the 2014 downturn

Shell poised to dethrone Exxon in oil titans' cash clash

LONDON: Royal Dutch Shell could usurp its largest rival Exxon Mobil as the energy sector's biggest cash generator after higher oil and gas prices combined with an improved performance lifted its 2017 revenue.

Chief Executive Ben van Beurden has made no secret of his desire to challenge the dominance of the world's largest listed oil company after its \$54 billion purchase of BG Group in 2016 catapulted Shell into second place in terms of production.

The Anglo-Dutch company on Thursday reported a more than doubling of profit in 2017 to \$16 billion, the highest since the start of the 2014 downturn as the effect of years of costs cuts and the integration of BG Group filtered through.

“We enter 2018 with continued discipline and confidence, committed to the delivery of strong returns and cash,” van Beurden said in a statement.

Shell's shares were 1.1 per cent



Shell's company logo is pictured at a gas station in Zurich. — **Reuters**

lower at 08:42 GMT, compared with a slightly positive open for the FTSE 100 index.

Cash flow from operations in 2017 rose to \$35.65 billion from \$20.62 billion a year earlier, putting Shell on course to beat Exxon, which

is forecast to have generated \$32.6 billion in 2017, according to estimates by Jefferies analysts. The rise was driven by a sharp recovery in oil prices in the second half of 2017, as the benchmark Brent price reached a three-year high of \$70 a barrel.

But it was also due to a sector-wide drive to reduce costs to adapt to a world of “lower for longer” oil prices, as Shell and others cut thousands of jobs and lowered spending.

As a result Shell can now generate more cash than it did with oil prices above \$100 a barrel and in November it raised its cash flow outlook from \$25 billion to \$30 billion by 2020, assuming an oil price of \$60 a barrel.

Free cash flow — cash available to pay for dividends and share buybacks — rose to \$27.6 billion from a negative \$10.3 billion in 2016.

On a quarterly basis, however, Shell's cash flow was down 21 per cent at \$7.25 billion, lower than expected, Biraj Borkhataria, analyst at RBC Capital Markets said in a note.

“Shell has had a good year overall and we don't want to read too much into one set of numbers,” he said.

Shell in the fourth quarter scrapped its scrip dividend, in a sign that it is confident of being able

to maintain around \$15 billion in annual dividend payments without resorting to scrip or borrowing after a three-year oil price downturn.

Shell's oil and gas production in the fourth quarter rose from the previous quarter to 3.756 million barrels of oil equivalent per day (boed) from 3.657 million boed, but on a yearly basis, it fell 4 per cent as a result of asset sales.

Production was expected to come down by 270,000 boed in 2018 as a result of divestments, including the sale of a North Sea portfolio to Chrysaor and its stake in Woodside Petroleum. Shell announced the sale of its stake in the Bongkot gas field and adjoining acreage offshore Thailand to PTT Exploration & Production PCL for \$750 million on Wednesday and is on track to hit a \$30 billion asset sale target.

Capital expenditure in 2017 was \$24 billion, slightly lower than the \$25-\$30 billion range Shell set until 2020. — **Reuters**

US private payrolls rise strongly; wage growth picking up



Workers spread asphalt on a street in the Cow Hollow neighbourhood in San Francisco, California. – Reuters

WASHINGTON: US private sector payrolls rose at a brisk pace in January as hiring increased across the board despite unseasonably cold weather, pointing to sustained labour market strength at the start of the year.

The robust jobs market is gradually putting upward pressure on compensation, with other data on Wednesday showing a solid increase in labour costs in the fourth quarter. Tightening labour market conditions and signs of a pickup in wage growth are likely to be welcomed by Federal Reserve officials who have long

expressed concern about benign inflation.

Fed officials were due to wrap up a two-day policy meeting later on Wednesday and were expected to leave interest rates unchanged. The US central bank has forecast three rate hikes this year after lifting borrowing costs three times in 2017.

The ADP national employment report showed private sector employment rose by 234,000 jobs in January, beating economists' expectations for an increase of only 185,000. December's payrolls count

was revised down to 242,000 from 250,000.

Manufacturing added 12,000 jobs last month and construction payrolls increased 9,000 despite bitterly cold temperatures in many parts of the country. There were also widespread job gains in the private services sector.

The ADP report is jointly produced with Moody's Analytics. It, however, has a poor record predicting the private payrolls component of the government's more comprehensive employment report. The Department

of Labour will publish January's employment report on Friday.

According to a Reuters survey of economists, nonfarm payrolls probably rose by 180,000 jobs in January after increasing 148,000 in December. The unemployment rate is forecast unchanged at a 17-year low of 4.1 per cent.

The dollar fell against the euro as an acceleration in underlying inflation in the euro zone in January kept expectations alive for a swift withdrawal of the European Central Bank's stimulus policies. Prices for US Treasuries were mostly lower, while stocks on Wall Street were trading higher after two days of steep losses.

In a separate report the Labour Department said the Employment Cost Index (ECI), the broadest measure of labour costs, increased 0.6 per cent in the fourth quarter after an unrevised 0.7 per cent rise in the third quarter.

That lifted the year-on-year rate of increase to 2.6 per cent, the largest gain since the first quarter of 2015, from 2.5 per cent in the third quarter.

Private sector wages and salaries rose 0.6 per cent in the fourth quarter. They were up 2.8 per cent in the 12 months through December, the biggest increase since the first quarter of 2015, and followed a 2.6 per cent gain in the third quarter.

Wage growth is expected to get a boost from the strong labour market, which is forecast to hit full employment this year. Economists expect the jobless rate to hit 3.5 per cent by the end of 2018. — Reuters

OGC participates in Muscat Marathon



MUSCAT: Underscoring its strong belief that a healthy and well-motivated workforce is indispensable to its corporate and operational success, OGC was an enthusiastic participant in the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon, which was held in Muscat during January 18-19, 2018.

A heartening number of OGC staffers as well as management executives joined the estimated 6,000-odd runners who were part of this exciting two-day event organised by Oman Sail in collaboration with Al Mouj Muscat and a host of sponsors. Also taking part were children of OGC employees, joining around 2,000 of their peers in this annual event. The 2018 edition of the Muscat Marathon featured 6 race categories: Marathon; Half Marathon; 10K; Marathon Relay; Kids' Run; and Charity Fun Run.

Besides encouraging its employees to be part of this iconic annual event, OGC is also eager to demonstrate its support for initiatives aimed at combatting diabetes, a serious lifestyle disease that presently afflicts around 14 per cent of Oman's population. OGC advocates an active and healthy lifestyle for its employees.

The 2018 edition of the Muscat Marathon featured 6 race categories: Marathon; Half Marathon; 10K; Marathon Relay; Kids' Run; and Charity Fun Run.

Premium products take centre stage at LG Innofest 2018



LG MEA President Kevin Cha with guests at Innofest 2018 product tour



LG MEA President Mr. Kevin Cha delivers keynote at Innofest 2018

LG Electronics (LG) — a global leader and technology innovator, unveiled a spectacular line-up of premium products for the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region at the company's annual two-day innovation event — Innofest 2018.

Held in the beautiful city of Cape Town — South Africa and attracting over 300 retailers, partners and customers from across the Middle East & Africa (MEA), Innofest 2018 represents an ideal platform to showcase latest products and ground-breaking technologies aimed at solidifying the image as a provider of ultra-premium products, accelerating a profitable growth in 2018.

Speaking at Innofest 2018, Kevin Cha, President, LG Electronics Middle East & Africa, said: "Today businesses are evolving at a rapid pace than ever before and it is during these testing times, that we adapt and keep up to the changes to be able to prosper and achieve sustainability. Building on our premium products strategy for the region, we remain committed to working and engaging with our various channel partners to ensure LG innovation and technology remains at the forefront of our business strategy to increase profitability and growth in the MEA."

Focussing on a variety of premium products that will be rolled out in 2018, the key highlights included the latest OLED TV with the ground-breaking 65"

LG W8 with a built-in a9 Intelligent Processor, which made its debut at the 2018 Consumer Electronics Show (CES); the TWINWash™ washing machine which has revolutionised and simplified consumer lifestyles with the capability to wash two loads simultaneously; the InstaView Refrigerator, which has won exceptional reviews and accolades for its high-end design and aesthetic, LG's most talked about LG SIGNATURE line-up with the LG SIGNATURE OLED TV, LG SIGNATURE Refrigerator, the LG SIGNATURE TWINWash™ washing machine and the LG SIGNATURE Air Purifier, revolutionising a premium lifestyle.

The latest air conditioning solutions with the cutting edge Inverter Technology will also form a key highlight. While regular air conditioners can only turn on and off, LG's Inverter Technology can control rotation frequency to produce cooling more efficiently. LG's smart inverter technology has taken LG Electronics to new heights in energy efficient and durable home appliances that facilitate savings from day one. The smart inverter compressor technology has proven to be a ground breaking solution with exceptional performance attributes specially designed for modern consumer. While consumers across the world prioritise a wide variety of different features when choosing appliances for their home, energy efficiency is notably growing.

Another key highlight at Innofest 2018 focussed on

the company's ground-breaking line-up of intelligent robots and innovations in artificial intelligence and developments in the IoT ecosystem.

LG Electronics (LG) was honoured with more than 90 awards at CES* 2018, led by the Official CES Best TV Product Award (presented by Engadget) for the fourth consecutive year, this time for the new LG AI OLED TV (model C8). LG also earned numerous best-of-show honours for the LG InstaView™ ThinQ™ Refrigerator and LG 4K UHD Projector.

"LG is a world leader in electronics and appliances and is now proud to usher in technological change that has gone beyond improving lives to offering seamless everyday experiences for consumers. We are driven and motivated by a philosophy that is innovation-led, sustainable and ultimately creates premium products," said Derek Sim, Marketing Director, LG Electronics Middle East & Africa.

Innofest 2018 served as a strategic platform to drive the message that, in 2018 the company will further accelerate its premium product strategy by enhancing overall brand image and focus on profitable growth with the roll out of premium and flagship model launches over the coming months across the MEA region. LG's latest premium products highlight the true extent of LG's innovation leadership and the company's passion for consumer-centric insights that drive the evolution of life.

Company plans to enhance recognition as a true premium brand by launching leading products aimed at driving a change in the market and accelerating a profitable growth in 2018

features



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Books on wheels

Will a mobile library ever work and help educate children? In Nigeria, it does. After receiving funding from the government for her pitch, the 10 million Naira this lady got was used to buy a vehicle and books that go in different schools everyday proving that necessity is indeed the mother of invention..... **14**



PHOTO OF THE DAY

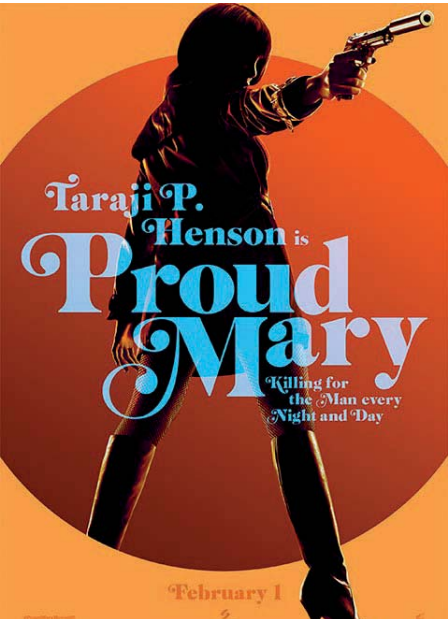
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snehuulovesphotography
Al Khuwair 2 - Muscat, Oman



NOW SHOWING



PROUD MARY

Genre: Action
Running Time: 100 min

Starring: Taraji P. Henson, Billy Brown and Jahi Di'Allo Winston

Language: English
Subtitle(s): Arabic

Henson is Mary, a hit woman working for an organised crime family in Boston, whose life is completely turned around when she meets a young boy whose path she crosses when a professional hit goes bad.

TODAY IS



WORLD WETLANDS DAY

World Wetlands Day is a great excuse to go tromp around in your nearest wetland, but it's also a great chance to take a moment to think about the environment. Have a seat and let's take a look at the wetlands and why it is important to have a day in their honour. Do you know what exactly a wetland is? A wetland can be defined as land that contains marshes or swamps.

Source: <https://www.daysoftheyear.com/>



CHINA

Metal tubes for export are seen at Lianyungang port in Jiangsu province. — Reuters



Life as it happens around the world



MALAYSIA

An Ethnic-Malaysian Hindu devotee with his mouth pierced makes his way towards the Batu caves temple during the Thaipusam festival celebrations in Kuala Lumpur. — AFP



JERUSALEM

The moon sets behind the city of Jerusalem. A cosmic event not seen in 36 years — a rare "super blood blue moon" — was seen in parts of western North America, Asia, the Middle East, Russia and Australia. — AFP



HAITI

A model presents a creation from Lauriane Pernock on the runway at the Haiti Fashion Week in Port-au-Prince. — Reuters

A monkey eats a lotus flower, during the annual Makha Bucha Day which celebrates Buddha's teachings, in Kandal province. — Reuters



CAMBODIA

READING



Kunle Tejuoso, owner of The Jazz Hole organizes bookshelves. The Jazz Hole is an independent record and book store in Lagos. — AFP

BOOKS ON WHEELS

SOPHIE BOUILLON

Funmi Ilori once had a dream about creating the biggest library in Africa. Now she drives vans packed with books to poor areas of Lagos to help children discover a love of reading.

"Readers are what?" she asks about 15 youngsters, sitting on little plastic stools in a classroom in a small converted lorry.

"Leaders!" they shout back in unison.

One of Ilori's iRead Mobile Library vans recently stopped at the Bethel primary school in the working class district of Ifako, in the heart of megacity Lagos.

Inside the school compound, slides and seesaws rust in the humid air.

The head teacher, Ruth Aderibigbe, said her 200 or so pupils only have textbooks at their disposal.

"Books cost a lot of money," she said.

When iRead turned up at the school two years ago with its wide selection of books, from toddlers' colouring books to children's novels, plus a few for adults, she welcomed it in with open arms.

"The children involved in the programme now speak and spell better in English," she said.

Inside the van, a young boy aged about 10 held a copy of "Half of a Yellow Sun", the international bestseller by the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

The book has clearly been well-read: its spine barely held the pages.

Adichie last week became embroiled in

controversy after a French journalist asked her during a visit to Paris whether there were any bookshops in Nigeria.

"I think it reflects very poorly on French people that you have to ask me that question," she responded, going on to rue what she said was France's racist and colonial view of Africa.

Ilori is aware of the row and understands why the question would offend.

But she sees a wider problem and has dedicated herself to trying to resolve it.

"Public libraries are functional in Nigeria, well, at least in Lagos.

But not many people maximise the use of them," she said.

"We need to catch new readers from a young age.

In rural communities, there are children that have never held a book.

"I advocate for community libraries everywhere.

Just as churches are springing up, libraries should be springing up."

Ilori is a former primary schoolteacher who began a book-lending business in 2003.

"Books in a basket. I was going door-to-door," she recalled. Books could be borrowed for just a few hundred naira (a couple of dollars) but her experience led her to realise that few adults in Nigeria's bustling economic hub had the luxury of having time to read.

Ten years after starting the "books in a basket" scheme, she came up with the mobile library idea and applied for funding from a Nigerian government development initiative.

The pitch was successful and landed her 10 million naira, which, with the exchange rate at the time, was the equivalent of about \$60,000.

With it, she bought a lorry and a small minibus.

Now, thanks to the grant and sponsors, she has been able to take on 13 employees, buy 1,900 books and four vans.

She visits four to six schools every day, organising reading workshops on evenings and at weekends for out-of-schoolchildren in slum areas with the help of volunteers.

The vans function like real libraries: children choose a book that they read at home, bring it back the following week and write a compulsory "review" on what it's about.

Sade chooses her favourite adventure story, even though she already knows it off by heart.

"Reading is my hobby.

Books give me ideas and they help me know better," she says.

Adinga plumps for "Bioenergy Insight", a magazine on renewable energy that he found on the shelves.

"Are you sure you're going to read that?" asks one of the volunteers, amused.

The young boy pulls a face and puts back the magazine, eventually choosing a comic book.

Afterwards, the schoolchildren, dressed in white and green uniforms with a bow tie for the boys, proudly troop back into class.

Tucked under their arms are books such as "Toy Story" or "Goldilocks and the Three Bears".Ilori looks and says there's something missing."We need more African children's books now," she says. As Adichie said in an interview published in The Atlantic in February 2017, the books she read as a little girl "and I think this is true for many other young children in countries that were formerly colonised, didn't reflect my reality". — AFP

PSYCHOLOGY

Best friends' brains light up the same way

Dating sites would be well-advised to add "brain activity" as a compatibility criterion, according to a study released on Tuesday showing that close friends have eerily comparable neural responses to life experiences.

"Our results suggest that friends process the world around them in exceptionally similar ways," said lead author Carolyn Parkinson, director of the Computational Social Neuroscience Lab at the University of California in Los Angeles.

Using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to compare which regions of the brain lit up as 42 volunteers watched short clips from news reports, music videos, comedy skits and documentaries, researchers were able to identify who among them were friends.

The closer the relationship, the more alike the neural patterns in parts of the brain governing emotional response, high-level reasoning, and the capacity to focus one's attention.

"Friends had the most similar neural activity patterns, followed by friends-of-friends," the authors said in a statement.

"You can predict who people are friends with

just by looking at how their brains respond to the video clips."

The 14 brief excerpts included journalists debating whether then US President Barack Obama should use humour in his speeches; a sentimental music video about a social outcast with a facial deformity; a documentary about baby sloths in Costa Rica; and scenes from a gay wedding.

Scientists long ago understood that "birds of a feather flock together" when it comes to human social networks, with people attracted more easily to those of the same age, physical appearance and ethnic background, as well as other demographic categories.

Online echo chambers

This tendency extends to social networks too, according to the study, published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

From an Darwinian perspective, evolutionary psychologists argue, the "like-with-like" principle favour social cohesion, empathy and frictionless collective action.

The relationships we forge with individuals who are clearly different from us — not of our

"tribe" — tend to be practical, task-oriented and short-lived, research has shown.

But seeking out peas from the same pod has a downside that is amplified in the digital age, said senior author Thalia Wheatley, a professor of psychology and brain science at Dartmouth University in Massachusetts.

"The cost of surrounding ourselves with only like-minded people is the creation of echo-chambers and polarisation," she said.

"This can be exacerbated by online communities that offer a constant diet of information that only confirms what people already believe."

One question not answered by the study is whether we naturally gravitate toward people who see the world the same way we do, or whether similarity — including the way our brains light up — springs from shared experience.

Most likely, it is a combination of the two. "We are a social species and live our lives connected to everybody else," said Wheatley.

"If we want to understand how the human brain works, then we need to understand how brains work in combination — how minds shape each other." — AFP



Dhananjaya hits ton in solid Lankan reply

Skipper Mahmudullah Riyad finished unbeaten on 83 after helping Bangladesh make 513 in the first innings of the opening Test against Sri Lanka in Chittagong on Thursday. In reply, Lanka were 187-1 after Dhananjaya de Silva hit a century (104 not out) and Kusal Mendis unbeaten on 83 at stumps on second day. Paceman Suranga Lakmal and spinner Rengana Herath took three wickets each for Lanka.



Morocco's Ayoub el Kaabi (left) heads the ball to score during the semifinal of the African Nations Championship against Libya at the Mohammed V Casablanca Stadium. — AFP

El Kaabi stars as Morocco, Nigeria reach final

CASABLANCA, Morocco: Surprise 2018 African Nations Championship (CHAN) star Ayoub el Kaabi scored twice as hosts Morocco overcame Libya 3-1 after extra time on Wednesday in a Casablanca semifinal thriller.

Nigeria won the later semifinal 1-0 over Sudan in Marrakech with Okechukwu Gabriel scoring the only goal in a match where each side had a player red-carded.

Eight-goal El Kaabi is the runaway leading scorer in the tournament restricted to footballers playing in their country of birth, with his nearest rivals five behind.

He netted twice against Mauritania and scored a hat-trick against Guinea during the group stage before breaking the deadlock in a quarterfinals victory over Namibia.

The 24-year-old striker, who was not guaranteed a starting place ahead of the Championship, found space to nod Morocco in front after 73 minutes against dogged Libya.

But a moment of madness from goalkeeper Anis Zniti gifted Libya an equaliser four minutes from time to stun a near-capacity crowd at the 65,000-seat Stade Mohammed V.

The dribbling shot-stopper was dispossessed inside the box and Abdulrahman Khalifa struck the loose ball into the net past a miskicking defender.

El Kaabi put Morocco ahead again seven minutes into extra time with the easiest of his eight goals, tapping the ball into the net at the far post after

EIGHT-GOAL EL KAABI IS THE RUNAWAY LEADING SCORER IN THE TOURNAMENT RESTRICTED TO FOOTBALLERS PLAYING IN THEIR COUNTRY OF BIRTH, WITH HIS NEAREST RIVALS FIVE BEHIND.

Libya failed to clear a corner.

The sharpshooter from the Renaissance Berkane club in northeastern Morocco was then substituted by coach Jamal Sellami, who introduced a third centre-back to defend the slim advantage.

Morocco sealed a first final appearance in the five-edition tournament three minutes from time when fouled Walid el Karti converted the penalty.

The best previous showing by the Moroccans was reaching the 2014 quarterfinals, when they surrendered a three-goal lead to be beaten 4-3 by Nigeria in South Africa.

Nigerian Gabriel, who scored the extra-time winner against Angola in the quarterfinals, finished a route-one move by darting through to fire a low shot past Sudan captain Akram Elhadi.

The Nigerians were reduced to 10 men when Ifeanyi Ifeanyi was sent off for a studs-up tackle and Sudanese Bakri Bachir got his marching orders for shirt pulling. — AFP

Eriksen stuns Man United as Chelsea crash to Bournemouth

LONDON: Tottenham's Christian Eriksen scored within 11 seconds on Wednesday to overshadow Alexis Sanchez's Premier League debut for Manchester United, while Chelsea crashed to a 3-0 defeat by Bournemouth at Stamford Bridge.

Manchester City ignored the carnage around them to march serenely on, widening their lead to an enormous 15 points with a 3-0 victory at home to West Brom with just 13 games still to play.

The build-up to Wednesday's matches was dominated by late moves in the transfer window but Spurs ensured the focus switched back to the pitch immediately, stunning Jose Mourinho's men with a performance full of attacking verve in a 2-0 win.

Chelsea, who earlier announced the signing of Olivier Giroud from Arsenal, conceded three second-half goals while Theo Walcott scored twice for his new club Everton in a 2-1 win against Leicester.

"We always try to be aggressive from the beginning," said delighted Spurs boss Mauricio Pochettino. "Our aim is to be focused from the beginning. You can win a game if you're ready to fight. It was massive to be up early in the game. Three more points puts us in a very good position to fight for the top four. I'm sure new signing Lucas Moura enjoyed that a lot."

The painful defeat for United realistically ends any lingering hopes they may have harboured of catching runaway leaders City.

Mourinho signed Sanchez this month to bolster his attacking options but Spurs caught the visitors cold at a packed Wembley, Eriksen opening the scoring from the kick-off following a long ball from inside the Tottenham half. The goal, timed at 10.48 seconds, was the first United have conceded in 2018 but despite some bright moments of their own they were 2-0 down just before the half-hour after Phil Jones lashed the ball into his own net.

Tottenham, who announced the signing of Moura from Paris Saint-Germain shortly before kick-off, were a constant threat and had multiple chances to stretch their lead.



Tottenham's Christian Eriksen celebrates with team-mates after scoring their first goal. — Reuters

Mourinho threw on Juan Mata and Marouane Fellaini in the 63rd minute but bizarrely took Fellaini off just seven minutes later, replacing him with Ander Herrera. The Belgium international took off his shirt and marched straight down the tunnel.

The impressive win for Spurs puts them right back at the heart of the hunt for a Champions League qualification spot, just two points behind fourth-placed Chelsea.

"It's a performance that starts with a ridiculous goal," said Mourinho. "That goal after a few seconds has a big influence in the game because Tottenham can play the way they like to play. In the end we played against a very good team. Both goals were ridiculous goals."

CHELSEA DEFEAT

Pochettino's men were further buoyed by the defeat for Chelsea, who fielded only Pedro up front, showing their need for more firepower. Callum Wilson, Junior Stanislas and Nathan Ake scored the goals for Bournemouth. "We have to accept it's a bad result

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS ON WEDNESDAY:

Chelsea 0 Bournemouth 3 (Wilson 51, Stanislas 64, Ake 67)
Everton 2 (Walcott 25, 39) Leicester 1 (Vardy 71-pen)
Manchester City 3 (Fernandinho 19, De Bruyne 68, Aguero 89) West Brom 0
Newcastle 1 (Lascelles 65) Burnley 1 (Vokes 85)
Southampton 1 (Stephens 64)
Brighton 1 (Murray 14-pen)
Stoke 0 Watford 0
Tottenham 2 (Eriksen 1, Jones 28-og)
Manchester United 0

and understand that we have to fight this season — if someone didn't understand this they don't understand football," said Chelsea boss Antonio Conte. "Football is not simple." He said the signing of Giroud would not necessarily solve the club's problems in front of goal.

"In the past with a striker we have chances and still don't score," he said. "I think now is not the right moment to speak of the transfer market for me. It's not important, it's important to work and do best with my players."

It was business as usual for Guardiola's City, who handed a debut to £57 million (\$80 million, 65 million euros) defender Aymeric Laporte, who only signed for the club from Athletic Bilbao on Tuesday.

City struck through Fernandinho midway through the first half and doubled their lead through Kevin De Bruyne in the second half before Sergio Aguero struck late on.

City earlier opted out of a bid for Leicester's Riyad Mahrez, with reports putting the transfer package at £95 million, after ending their chase of Sanchez earlier in the transfer window, due to slam shut at 2300 GMT.

In other big-money moves on Wednesday, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang sealed a move to Arsenal from Borussia Dortmund for a club-record fee of around £56 million.

In other results on Wednesday, Newcastle drew 1-1 with Burnley, Southampton drew 1-1 at home to Brighton and Stoke were involved in a goalless stalemate with Watford.

— AFP

LOCAL FLAVOUR



Team Suhar clinch title in exciting finale to OGC Internal Football Championship

MUSCAT: OGC's Internal Football Championship, first introduced in 2016, is now an exciting annual fixture of the OGC's calendar, offering an opportunity for employees across the company to flaunt their footballing skills.

The annual championship was conceived with the aim of fostering a spirit of camaraderie and cohesion across OGC's large and geographically distributed workforce. The event brings together players and football enthusiasts alike amid an atmosphere of bonhomie

and festivity that helps strengthen bonds of friendship and mutual respect across the organisation.

This year's tournament saw a total of 12 teams competing for the coveted Championship Cup. It began with four group-qualifying rounds with teams Suhar, Duqm, Nimr, Muscat, Salalah, Fahud, Khazzan, Mukhaizna, Murayrat, Al Ghubra, OOTC, and Marafiq. Suhar, Duqm, Nimr and Muscat entered the semifinal stage.

In the final, Team Suhar trounced

Team Duqm in an exciting match that saw the winners combine skill, coordination and teamwork to clinch the trophy. Interestingly, neither of the two finalists of the last championship — Muscat and Fahud — figured in this year's finale.

The entire tournament was held in a spirit of sportsmanship, competitiveness, and ethical on-field behaviour, which are synonymous with OGC's corporate values as the energy infrastructure pillar of the Oman Oil Group.

TAYYIB IKRAM VISITS NAQVI MUSEUM



Tayyib Ikram, CEO of Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) and member of the International Hockey Federation (FIH) executive board made a surprise visit to hockey personality SAS Naqvi and viewed his museum collection. Ikram was delighted to see more than 75 years of hockey career and the Olympic moments that Naqvi had in his collection. Tahir Zaman, Oman national hockey coach, and Shakir Munir, International Coordinator of Oman Hockey Association, accompanied Ikram during the visit.

Realex club lifts trophy

MUSCAT: Host team Realex football club lifted the Realex Challengers trophy last Friday at the Ghubra power plant ground when they defeated Muscat United football club 3-1 in the final. The star player of Realex, Mohammed Nihal, who was off colour in the preliminary rounds, came up with a hat-trick in the final to lift his team to victory.

Sixteen teams took part in the tournament which was supervised by Omani referees Rashid Mubarak al Harthi and Abdul Wahad al Hadabbi. Large numbers of spectators were presented in the ground cheering their teams with noted sports commentator Salih Thacher presenting the electrifying live commentary on the ground. Most of the matches had produced high quality of football much



to the thrill of the crowd. The one-day event which started in the morning at 9 am till late in the evening was organised by Realex football club.

In the semifinals, Realex defeated Soccar Fans 1-0 and Muscat United defeated United Kerala 2-1 in a tense match. The winning goal by Muscat United came in the final moment of the game.

However, United Kerala won the second runners-up trophy when they defeated Soccar Fans in the toss after both the teams drew level in the penalty shoot-out.

Mohammed Nihal of Realex was declared the player of the tournament for his wonderful performance in the knock-out stages, while Harish of United Kerala was adjudged the

best goalkeeper of the tournament. Individual trophies were given to the players of both winners and runners-up team along with the huge Realex challengers trophy. Moideen, Managing Director of Blue Sapphire International and Shanawaz Majeed, Managing Director of Muscat Oasis Trading along with other members of the club gave away the prizes.

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Oman's
Abdullah al
Barwani in
action.
– Anuroop A

OMAN CONTINUE WINNING SPREE

UAE second in Pool A with win, Singapore top Pool B

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Oman prevailed over a fighting Myanmar to notch up their fourth win on trot in the Davis Cup Asia/Oceania Group IV tournament in Muscat on Thursday.

As like other three rubbers, Oman managed a 3-0 victory but with each match stretched to the third set by the Myanmar players.

Oman top Pool A with their fourth win and 12-0 on aggregate, while UAE are second with fourth win but 11-1 on aggregate.

On Friday, Oman face UAE which will decide the group winners.

In the opening singles at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex court, top Omani player Mohammed al Nabhani faced a setback early on as Myanmar's Aung Kuaw Naing took the first set 7-5. This was a wake up call for experienced Mohammed as he stepped up gear in next two sets to romp home 6-2, 6-1 in



Oman's Mohammed al Nabhani plays a shot.

a match that lasted nearly two hours.

In the second singles, Abdullah al Barwani ended the challenge of Aung Myo Thant 6-2, 4-6, 6-3. The Myanmar player came back well in the second set to make it one-set all but could not keep the tempo for the last set.

In the doubles, Oman captain Siddiq al Hashmi opted for brothers Younis al Rawahi and Muneer al Rawahi. The Omani pair overcame the spirited challenge from Myanmar pair of Zaw San Oo and Tin Myo Wai 6-3, 4-6, 6-3.

In his second ever Davis Cup match, teenager Muneer complimented well with his elder brother in crucial moments to seal the game in Oman's favour.

"We had a tough day. Our players had to fight for their victories as Myanmar players did well in all three matches," Siddiq al Hashmi said.

"We had a long and tough day today. But I think it will be good for us as we have to play more tougher opponents in UAE tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's tie will be important

for both of us. I am sure UAE will also be looking to top the group. Obviously we also want to top group so that we can avoid playing Singapore who are expected to top the other group," the Oman captain added.

In the other Pool A match, UAE beat Iraq 3-0.

In the singles ties, UAE had an easy time with Abdulrahman al Janahi beating Barakat Zainy 6-3, 6-3 and Fahd al Janahi defeating Adel Mustafa al Saedi 6-2, 6-4.

In the doubles, Abdulrahman al Janahi and Fares al Janahi had to fight to overcome Iraqi pair of Adel Mustafa al Saedi and Barakat Zainy 6-7 (4), 6-1, 6-3.

In Pool B, Singapore remained the lone undefeated team after blanking Turkmenistan 3-0.

In the first singles, Roy Hobbs defeated Atlymyrat Gurbanov 6-2, 6-2 and then in the second singles, Shaheed Alam defeated Yuriy

Roguskiy 6-0, 6-1.

In the doubles, Yuan-Xiong Hui and Hao Yuan Ng defeated Atlymyrat Gurbanov and Yuriy Roguskiy 7-6 (5), 7-5 to make it 3-0.

In other Pool B ties, Bahrain edged Guam 2-1 and Mongolia dropped only one game in the entire rubber as they thrashed Tajikistan 3-0.

RESULTS

Pool A
Bangladesh bt Kyrgyzstan 2-1
Sree-Amol Roy bt Georgy Kotlyarevsky 6-0, 6-1; Kirill Kistanov bt Dipu Lal 6-4, 6-4; Ranjan Ram/Sree-Amol Roy bt Kirill Kistanov/Georgy Kotlyarevsky 7-5, 6-0.

Oman bt Myanmar 3-0
Mohammed al Nabhani bt Aung Kyaw Naing 5-7, 6-2, 6-1; Abdullah al Barwani bt Aung Myo Thant 6-2, 4-6, 6-3; Muneer al Rawahi/Younis al Rawahi bt Zaw San Oo/Tin Myo Wai 6-4, 4-6, 6-3.

UAE bt Iraq 3-0
Abdulrahman al Janahi bt Barakat Zainy 6-3, 6-3; Fahd al Janahi bt

Adel Mustafa al Saedi 6-2, 6-4; Abdulrahman al Janahi/Fares al Janahi bt Adel Mustafa al Saedi/ Barakat Zainy 6-7 (4), 6-1, 6-3.

Pool B
Bahrain bt Guam 2-1
Hasan Abdalnabi bt Christopher Cajigan 7-5, 6-4; Ali Dawan bt Daniel Llarenas 6-2, 7-6 (4); Ali Dawan/Yusuf Qaed lost to Jean Pierre Huynh/Daniel Llarenas 3-6, 5-7.

Mongolia bt Tajikistan 3-0
Tamir Ankhabayar bt Shakhrom Umarov 6-0, 6-0; Temuugei Enkhsaikhan bt Firuz Mukhidinov 6-1, 6-0; Tamir Ankhabayar/Temuugei Enkhsaikhan bt Firdavs Odinaev/ Shakhrom Umarov 6-0, 6-0.

Singapore bt Turkmenistan 3-0
Roy Hobbs bt Atlymyrat Gurbanov 6-2, 6-2; Shaheed Alam bt Yuriy Roguskiy 6-0, 6-1; Yuan-Xiong Hui/Hao Yuan Ng bt Atlymyrat Gurbanov/Yuriy Roguskiy 7-6 (5), 7-5.

Friday's schedule

Pool A: Iraq v Kyrgyzstan, Oman v UAE, Bangladesh v Myanmar.

Pool B: Singapore v Bahrain, Tajikistan v Guam, Turkmenistan v Mongolia.

Sohar take on Al Mudhaibi in HM Cup last 16

JABER AL AJMI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

After a break of two months the local football competition come back in action through His Majesty's Cup last 16 as all the fixtures will be played on February 2 and 3.

The fixtures are played as a single leg knock-out matches so all teams will fight to reach the quarterfinal.

On Friday, Al Wusta face Sur, Al Bashayer play against Samayil, Al Nasr host Al Rustaq and Sohar take on Al Mudhaibi.

Saturdays action will witness Al Shabab take on Nizwa, Bidya meet Ahli Sidab, Saham play Al Seeb while Al Suwaiq clash with Oman Club.

At Al Seeb Stadium (16:55), Sur look favourites to overcome Al Wusta

AL BASHAYER, WHO HAD SHOCKED MUSCAT 3-0 IN THE LAST 32, WILL HOPE TO CONTINUE THE GOOD SHOW WHEN THEY FACE SAMAYIL IN IBRI

according to the recent performances by both the clubs in the First Division League. Sur did very well in the transfer window and they compete in their league to qualify for the Omantel League.

Al Bashayer, who had shocked Muscat 3-0 in the last 32, will hope to continue the good show when they face Samayil at Ibri Stadium (17:05).

Al Nasr club are set to take on Al

Rustaq in a game that might look on papers a bit easy for Omantel side Al Nasr. Despite the fact that Al Rustaq were relegated to the First Division last season, they still have a good number of players who can annoy the Salalah giants. It kicks off (17:25) at Salalah Stadium.

The main action of Friday will be at Sohar stadium (20:15) as both Omantel sides Sohar and Al Mudhaibi face off. Both of the teams have prepared very well for the tie especially through the winter transfer window.

Sohar will try to utilise their home conditions to go past Al Mudhaibi, who have been showing a great season in their first participation in Omantel League with local manager Anwar al Habsi.



Muscat and Al Bashayer players in action during the HM Cup round of 32 match. – Mohammed Mahjoub